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Mubarak, portrait of the week by Bahgory 10

Collision fallout

THE MID-AIR collision of two Israeli helicopters flying to Lebanon claimed the lives of 73 soldiers, making it the worst accident in Israel's military history and reviving questions about its continued involvement in Lebanon. Following the crash of the two US-made Sikorsky Ch-53 transports around 7pm on Tuesday, Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu cancelled a trip to Jordan, scheduled for yesterday, and a meeting with Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat, planned for today.

The helicopters were flying to the 15km-wide occupied zone in southern Lebanon which Israel carved out in 1985. Twenty-seven Israeli soldiers were killed fighting guerrillas in Lebanon last year.

"An end must be put to the tragedy in Lebanon... We cannot pull out unilaterally but we also cannot stay this way forever," commented opposition Labour leader Shimon Peres.

"In the end we pay the same price, but after so many victims, after so much sorrow," Peres told Israel's Channel One Television by telephone from Geneva.

The Galilee panhandle, where the crash occurred, is best known to the world as the target of Katyusha rockets fired from Lebanon by *Hizbollah* guerrillas. The question of Israel's continued involvement in Lebanon had already been raised earlier this week following the killing of three soldiers in a *Hizbollah* bomb attack.

Public Security Minister Avigdor Kahalani complained that Israeli soldiers in Lebanon were like sitting ducks. Defence Minister Yitzhak Mordechai demanded that the Lebanese government take control in Lebanon and rejected calls by some Israelis for a unilateral withdrawal. Other Israeli leaders blamed Syria, the main power broker in Lebanon, for backing Hizbollah.

Wissa trial

PROSECUTOR Ragaa El-Arabi decided yesterday to put Raouf Wissa, the owner of the building in Heliopolis that collapsed on 27 October, and three others on trial on charges of negligence that led to the death of 64 people under the debris of the fallen building, reports **Ahmed Moussa.**

Wissa was accused of adding unauthorised floors which the building's concrete columns and structure could not support. The three others were accused of making unauthorised alterations in a first floor apartment, including the demolition of walls and breaking some columns.

Satanic case

PROSECUTOR Hisham Saraya yesterday ordered that 15 young people be remanded in custody for another 15 days for further investigation in connection with so-called Satan worship.

Seventeen others were released on LE200 bail each and five minors were turned over to their parents. Saraya said he was planning to officially charge some of those in detention with propagating ideas that deride revealed religion. *(see pp 3&11)*

INSIDE

photo: Sherif Sonbol

THE CITY of a thousand minarets sports rather more than a thousand television serials, and at no time of the year are they busier than *during the* month of Ramadan, when TV schedules are normally packed with the *cream of the* programmers' crop. So what was actually on offer over the past month? For an *overview on* Ramadan scheduling, see p.12

Final status vies with Oslo

Will the final status negotiations start before the interim agreement is implemented? **Lamis Andoni** reports from Washington on Palestinian apprehensions

When the Hebron Protocol was signed on 15 January, it had a different meaning to the three principal parties involved. To the US it was a breakthrough that salvaged the peace process. To Israel it was a testimony to the Likud's commitment to peace. To the Palestinians it was a crucial step to ensure that they do not remain stuck in fragmented enclaves.

Two weeks later, the Palestinians are still waiting for the next step to come. Meanwhile, Israel and the US are waiting for the Arab world, that had slowed down normalisation of relations with Tel Aviv, to accelerate the process now that Binyamin Netanyahu has proved his "commitment to peace."

"Israel has taken a very important step; it needs to be reciprocated," a source in the American administration stated. He explained that it was time for the Arab governments which committed themselves to broaden ties with Israel to take the initiative.

This is exactly what the Palestinians fear. Now that the pressure has eased on Israel, it is likely that Netanyahu will not take steps towards solving the many pending issues in the interim agreements. "I don't think that it is wise for Arab governments to judge the agreement as testimony to Israel's commitment to the peace process. The more serious challenge still lies ahead," chief Palestinian negotiator Saeb Erekat told *Al-Ahram Weekly* in a telephone interview.

American administration officials say that they do not buy the Palestinian argument. "We need to create a regional environment conducive to peace," an administration source explained. Analysts close to the American government say that the Clinton administration does not look favourably on Palestinian attempts to slow down the normalisation process. The analysts say that the administration feels that it is not the Palestinians' "business" to interfere in other countries' ties with Israel.

The American understanding of the issue contrasts with the Palestinian need to reentrench the centrality of the Palestinian plight in the Israeli-Arab conflict and consequently the success of the peace process. The notion of the Palestinian issue being central to the peace process was asserted last year for the first time since the PLO signed a separate agreement with Israel in 1993. The Palestinians warned that the Israeli refusal to negotiate meant the collapse of the peace process.

Now that the stalemate is broken, the US hopes that the other tracks, including Syrian-Israeli negotiations and the integration of Israel in the region, will gain new momentum.

The re-emerging Palestinian frustration has roots in the agreement that was hailed as a breakthrough. For, while the protocol and the attached Notes of Record linked the Hebron deal to other pending issues, they fell short of a clear Israeli commitment to address them in a clearly defined framework.

For a start, the Notes of Record state that both sides will deal with the issue of the Palestinian prisoners according to the Oslo agreements. However, they lack an unequivocal Israeli commitment to release these prisoners within a specific time frame. Among the 34 pending issues are the opening of the Gaza airport and port and a safe passage between Gaza and the West Bank across Israeli territory.

This poses a serious problem for the Palestinian leadership. It is concerned that if Israel continues to procrastinate, the two sides will enter the permanent status negotiations before the interim arrangements are implemented. The permanent status negotiations are due to start two months after the implementation of the redeployment from Hebron.

The Oslo agreements stipulate that the interim arrangements must be completed prior to the start of the permanent status negotiations. Yet, Netanyahu now argues that the protocol and the points attached to it give Israel control over the time frame and the nature of future redeployments from rural areas in the West Bank. In his speech to the Knesset following the initialing of the protocols, he maintained that since the new agreement stipulates that further steps hinge on the Palestinian security commitment "to combat terror" Israel will have the freedom to control the time framework.

Initially the Palestinians thought that the US, party to the negotiations through special envoy Dennis Ross, would act as guarantor. The letter of assurances, however, written by former US Secretary of State Warren Christopher to Netanyahu poured cold water on Palestinian expectations.

The letter did contain a deadline for further Israeli redeployments, but endorsed the Israeli claim that it is entitled to determine the nature and the size of these redeployments. Even though the letter responded to Palestinian demands by stating that the redeployments should be completed by mid-1998, it also stated that Israel would determine "the military locations" it will choose to keep.

Neither the Oslo Accords nor the Taba interim agreement define the areas that will be designated as "military locations", thus giving Israel the freedom to retain control of as much territory as it sees fit for its "security needs."

Palestinian officials told the *Weekly* that the Palestinian negotiating team sent a letter to Mr Ross's office stating that they are not obliged to accept the American and Israeli definitions and terms of future redeployments. They said that the letter was added to "the minutes of the agreements".

American administration sources, who confirmed to the *Weekly* that they received the letter, said that it was added to "the records" but that it will not be considered part of the agreements.

From the American viewpoint, the Palestinians should not prejudge the result of the Israeli position and should give the new momentum a chance to develop. "There are no iron-clad guarantees. Let the process take its course," said one well-informed source in the administration.

For the Palestinian leadership, however, in the absence of guarantees, the peace process is likely to mean the continuation of the Israeli de facto annexation of lands in Jerusalem, the West Bank and Gaza.

Furore over Copenhagen

The creation of a 'grassroots alliance' *for Middle East peace has triggered a* heated controversy in intellectual circles. **Nevine Khalil** reports



El-Kholi *Sid-Ahmed* *Said* *Ebeid*

Cairo was buzzing last week with allegations that, by signing the Copenhagen Declaration creating the International Alliance for Arab-Israeli peace, a group of prominent Egyptian thinkers had 'gone over to the other side.' Government officials, on the other hand, welcomed the declaration, which was the outcome of three days of discussions between Egyptian, Jordanian, Palestinian, Israeli and European intellectuals and public figures who gathered under the auspices of the Danish government between 29-31 January.

The nine Egyptian participants were denounced by some of their compatriots as being unrepresentative of the Egyptian intelligentsia, assuming the role of negotiators and *falling into a Mossad/Likud trap.* The signatories countered that they had acted in an individual, not representative, capacity and that their objective was to win over mainstream Israeli public opinion to their view of the peace process.

Participants included Al-Ahram writer Lutfi El-Kholi, Abdel-Moneim Said, director of Al-Ahram Centre for Political and Strategic Studies, former ambassador Salah Bassiouni and philosophy professor Murad Wahba. Among the 70 participants in Copenhagen were *Jordanian Ihsan Shurdom,* former adviser to King Hussein, Palestinian Sari Nusseibah, president of Al-Quds University and David Kimche, former director-general of the Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Along with El-Kholi, these three made up the steering group for the meeting.

Lutfi El-Kholi described the alliance as "the first-time participation of grassroots trends in the Arab-Israeli conflict, which is no longer being left for governments alone." He believes that people have not yet understood the alliance, but added that a meeting was in the making to bring together the Egyptian participants in Copenhagen and their critics to discuss their differences.

Another criticism levelled at the Egyptian participants was that they allowed their signatures to appear alongside those of shady characters like David Kimche, who is believed to have worked for Mossad, the Israeli intelligence agency. Other Israeli signatories include four Knesset members from the Labour and Geishar parties.

Abdel-Moneim Said emphasised that the Arabs should welcome any European role in the peace process and support efforts "to encourage large sectors of Israeli society to side with us on certain issues." Responding to accusations that the initiative represented a Mossad trap, Said replied: "We are not investigating the background of participants to find out which intelligence apparatus is *behind them."* He added *that speculating* on Kimche's possible Mossad connections was irrelevant, "because if a Mossad man agrees to a Palestinian state, that's the kind of response we want."

The Copenhagen Declaration also represents the fruits of what is known as the Louisiana process, which began in September 1995 when four Egyptians, namely *Al-Ahram* writers El-Kholi and Mohamed Sid-Ahmed, the director of the National Centre for Middle East Studies Ahmed Fakhr and the then member of parliament Mona Makram Ebeid, went to Copenhagen to hold an open dialogue with Israeli intellectuals.

Sid-Ahmed, who turned down an invitation to last month's meeting, believes that Egyptian-Egyptian dialogue is "a prerequisite for dialogue abroad, to minimise splits in the ranks." There had been, he added, no such dialogue before the Copenhagen meeting. Said replied that initiating an intellectual dialogue with Israeli counterparts had been extensively discussed. "There is nothing new in talking to the other side," he stressed.

Sid-Ahmed did not attend the Copenhagen meeting because he disagreed with the draft declaration, which did not mention the Palestinian state, halting settlement expansion or the status of Jerusalem. And while he does not sympathise with the uproar the declaration has caused in Egypt, he can understand the rationale behind it. "We cannot shift from total boycott to total alliance," Sid-Ahmed said. "We are creating a new political reality," said El-Kholi, "and not just sitting on the sidelines issuing reactionary statements of denial."

Sid-Ahmed also objects to the fact that the alliance may be seen as a second track of negotiations, which he says "is not the job of intellectuals." Mona Makram Ebeid agreed that intellectuals should not take on the role of negotiators. While favouring dialogue with Israelis, she opposes it being bound by a charter, adding that this alliance appeared to be "shoving normalisation down the Arabs' throats".

Denunciations of the declaration have been issued over the past 10 days from the Egyptian Writers Union, the Egyptian Intellectuals Association, the Egyptian Committee for Resisting Normalisation, the Committee for the Defence of National Culture and the Arab Artists' Union. El-Kholi dismissed these statements as unilateral declarations from small groups of opposers within these organisations.

A more damning statement came from the Central Secretariat of the leftist Tagammu Party, of which El-Kholi was once a leading member. The statement threatened disciplinary procedures against party members who engage in activities contrary to party policy. El-Kholi has spoken to Tagammu leader Khaled Mohieddin, maintaining that he "welcomes any action taken by the party against him."

The Copenhagen Declaration was well received by the Egyptian government. Foreign Minister Amr Moussa described it as "strong and confirms that the trend for peace in Israel can play a positive role to consolidate the peace process." He noted the clear reference to Palestinian statehood, according to the land-for-peace formula and UN resolutions 242, 338 and 425.

And so the controversy continues. Ebeid believes that since the Egyptian government has endorsed the declaration, "the alliance might go somewhere." Sid-Ahmed, on the other hand, believes that the Louisiana process has backfired, while El-Kholi sees a bright light at the end of the tunnel. Observers, meanwhile, agree that the uproar in Cairo may have lost the Egyptian participants their credibility.

(see full text of Copenhagen Declaration, p.4; commentary, pp.10 &11)

Parliamentary fracas over Islamist MP

Opposition MPs walked out of parliament in anger, when the People's Assembly's ruling NDP majority lost no time in responding to a Ministry of Justice request and stripping the sole representative of the Islamist-oriented Labour Party of his parliamentary immunity. Gamal Essam El-Din reports

About 15 opposition and independent deputies walked out of a People's Assembly sitting to demonstrate the strength of their opposition to the Assembly's decision to strip Ali Fath El-Bab, the sole representative of the Islamist-oriented Labour Party, of his parliamentary immunity. The Justice Ministry wants Fath El-Bab questioned about alleged involvement in anti-state activity along with members of the outlawed Muslim Brotherhood in his home district of Helwan, south of Cairo, and about alleged plotting to infiltrate civil institutions.

The protesting opposition and independent deputies argued that the charges levelled against Fath El-Bab were not strong enough to justify the removal of his immunity. They also accused the Assembly's Legislative and Constitutional Committee of taking contradictory positions.

The justice minister's request to strip Fath El-Bab of his immunity first came up for discussion on Saturday morning in the Assembly's Legislative and Constitutional Committee. The request was promptly rejected by a majority of the committee on the grounds that it did not contain clear-cut charges. Fath El-Bab was simply given permission to testify before the state security prosecutors.

When the Assembly met in plenary session about an hour later, Mohamed Moussa, the Legislative Committee's chairman, made the surprise announcement that he had been informed by committee members that they had revoked their decision and had sought a new meeting to study the Justice Ministry's request more carefully. Assembly Speaker Ahmed Fathi Sorour declared that the Assembly's internal regulations gave its committees the right to re-assess any reports submitted to them ahead of a debate by the full Assembly.

The Legislative Committee held a second meeting in the evening to reconsider the Justice Ministry's request. This time, the request was approved by a large majority of committee members.

In the morning of the following day, Monday, the Legislative Committee's report on stripping Fath El-Bab of his immunity came up for debate by the Assembly.

Addressing the House, Fath El-Bab accused the Legislative Committee of violating the Assembly's regulations because a list of the charges levelled by the prosecutor against him was not attached to the Justice Ministry's request, as the regulations dictate. At this point, Sorour interrupted Fath El-Bab to announce that he had received a list of the charges. In response, Fath El-Bab reiterated that the list of charges had not been attached to the Justice Ministry's request while it was being discussed by the Legislative Committee.

"However," Fath El-Bab continued, "I have decided to take the initiative of asking the Legislative Committee to strip me of parliamentary immunity because strong men do not need immunity and because I am completely confident that my position is sound."

Fath El-Bab said the charges "concocted" against him by State Security officers were groundless. "According to them, I am accused of plotting with others to infiltrate syndicates and universities. I think these are legal channels for public action, and those who are trying to tap these channels should never be accused of committing an offence. They have even charged me with distributing religious literature to students and workers. I think the basic job of parliamentary deputies is to provide young people with religious awareness so that they do not fall prey to devil worship or other deviant behaviour," he said. By basing its decision to strip him of his parliamentary immunity on an investigation conducted by State Security officers, the Assembly will be "setting a dangerous precedent" in parliamentary history, he added.

Abdel-Moneim El-Oleimi, an independent from Tanta in Gharbiya governorate and a member of the Legislative Committee, confirmed that the Justice Ministry's request was based on an investigation carried out by State Security officers. "We concluded that the request was devoid of any material evidence upon which he could be prosecuted," said El-Oleimi. He urged the Assembly not to strip Fath El-Bab of his immunity but simply give him permission to testify before state security prosecutors.

However, Hamdi Qandil, a member of the ruling National Democratic Party (NDP), asked the Assembly to approve the Justice Ministry's request "because criminal cases are usually preceded by State Security investigation."

Khaled Mohieddin, leader of the leftist Tagammu Party, countered that the State Security investigation upon which the Justice Ministry's request was based did not amount to official charges. "The conclusions of this investigation may or may not be true," Mohieddin said. "This is why I think it would be better if Fath El-Bab was simply allowed to testify before the prosecutors."

Ayman Nour, a Wafdist deputy, wondered if the Justice Ministry's request to strip Fath El-Bab of immunity was not part of a security clampdown ahead of municipal elections next April.

And Mohamed Marzouq, an independent from Kafr El-Dawwar in Beheira Governorate, argued that the Assembly's approval of the Justice Ministry's request would mean that members of parliament could lose their immunity in the future on the evidence of investigation reports prepared by state security officers.

Mohamed Moussa, the Legislative Committee's chairman, emphasised the committee's right to reconsider reports submitted to the Assembly. "It is not enough simply to allow him to testify before the prosecutors, because they will send us a second request, asking that he be stripped of immunity so that legal action can be taken against him," he argued.

Abdel-Wadoud Abdel-Karim, an NDP member of the Legislative Committee and chairman of the Assembly's Financial and Administrative Affairs Committee, then advanced a somewhat lame excuse for the committee's reversal of its decision. "When the request was discussed by the committee for the first time, it was discussed in a hurry, bearing in mind that we are in Ramadan, the mouth of fasting."

This argument drew fire from Mohamed El-Doheiri, a member of the Tagammu Party, and Ibrahim El-Nimiki, the Legislative Committee's deputy chairman. "If you think that Ramadan and fasting have an impact on the performance of the committee, then you should not be trusted to be one of its members," El-Doheiri said.

El-Nimiki insisted that the committee had been in a state of "complete physical fitness while discussing the request" and had changed its position only when Fath El-Bab personally asked to be stripped of his immunity.

As the debate ended, the independent and opposition MPs walked out, without the list of charges against Fath El-Bab being distributed either to MPs or the press.

Gaddafi's dreams via satellite

A booklet outlining Muammar Gaddafi's dream of establishing a free state for the oppressed was the subject of discussion at a Book Fair seminar in which the Libyan leader took part via satellite link. Mona El-Nahhas attended



Larger than life: Gaddafi taking part, via satellite, in the Book Fair discussions of his latest book *photo: Ayman Ibrahim*

A group of Egyptian, Libyan and Syrian intellectuals gathered at a Book Fair seminar last week to analyse Muammar Gaddafi's latest literary work, predicting the collapse of capitalism and the triumph of the "oppressed." For the first time in the Fair's 29-year history, a satellite link was set up, connecting Cairo with Tripoli, to make it possible for the Libyan leader to participate in the discussion.

The 50-page booklet, sold for LE1.50, is titled *Long Live the State of the Oppressed*, and carries the sub-title "Publication Against the Law." The critics who took part in the discussion agreed that the author came up with some not necessarily well-knit, but curious ideas. Gaddafi explains that by referring to "people held in contempt," he means the oppressed everywhere, to whom mankind is greatly indebted. Then he puts forward the rather astonishing assumption that communism has not collapsed, as most people believe, simply because it has not been born yet. An even more surprising assertion concerns the inevitable collapse of the capitalist system.

The start of the discussion was delayed for about an hour, during which the satellite hook-up was made. Gaddafi appeared on a large screen and offered thanks to the Fair organisers for giving him the opportunity to discuss his work with Arab intellectuals.

He shed light on some of the ideas contained in the booklet and answered questions posed by the audience who crowded the hall.

According to Gaddafi, the term "oppressed" means every person or state which suffers from oppression and thus applies to most Third World countries. "I usually take the side of the poor, the helpless and the oppressed. This is the aim of the Libyan revolution. I have tried to depict that in this book and in my previous works," Gaddafi said.

"It is an unusual moment when intellectuals gather to conduct dialogue with one of the greatest and most talented Arab thinkers," said Samir Sarhan, head of the General Book Organisation, as he introduced Gaddafi to the audience.

Alieddin Hilal, dean of Cairo University's Faculty of Economics and Political Science, said Gaddafi's work "runs on two different, but parallel lines: a literary line marked by eloquent images and poetic expressions, and a scientific line which analyses certain historical facts. So the book may be viewed as a combination of literature and science, objective analysis and the subjective perspective."

Hilal took the author to task for "putting forth some of his personal views as if they were accepted facts, although they have no solid foundation." A case in point is the prediction, "which is removed from reality," that American capitalism is doomed to collapse.

Ali Khosheim, a Libyan critic, said the aim of the work, which can hardly be classified as a book, is to urge the oppressed everywhere to give up their inaction and struggle for the establishment of their Utopia. "It does not matter how long it takes them to realise their dream. They should await their victory, even if it comes 360 years from now," Khosheim quoted the book as saying. Explaining the subtitle, Khosheim said the book stands against all unjust laws and customs which hinder the oppressed from enjoying freedom and independence.

Abdel-Aziz Sharaf, a cultural writer for *Al-Ahram*, said the book's aim is to "kindle the national awareness of the Arab countries, which should be ready to confront surrounding challenges."

Syrian writer Yassin Rifa'ya said that it would have been better if Gaddafi was more realistic and focused upon the present, instead of talking about the unknown. "It is the present which makes the future," he said. "But it seems that the author got bored with both the present and the past. So he had no other choice but to dream of an ideal future, neglecting the time element."

Privatisation ruled constitutional

THE SUPREME Constitutional Court, in what was described as landmark decision, has ruled that the government's privatisation programme does not run counter to the provisions of the Constitution. The court, under Counsellor Awad El-Morr, threw out a claimant's contention that Law 203 for 1991, which regulates the public business sector, allowing for the privatisation of some industries, was unconstitutional. The claimant argued that the law contradicts two constitutional provisions: that the public sector has a pioneer role in development and that the people have control over the public sector.

Explaining its decision, the court said the Constitution should not be viewed as containing final and permanent solutions in the economic sphere, which is subject to constant change and fluctuation. The blind imposition of constitutional provisions in this field would amount to chasing the wind, the court said. However, any interpretation of the Constitution should be made in the light of ultimate values, the first of which is the political and economic liberation of the homeland and its citizens.

The court said that both the public and private sectors have roles to play in development. Investments need not necessarily take the form of economic organisations established by the state. And the state is not obliged to keep public economic organisations functioning if they face problems, if they do not make a profit, or if they can be re-organised to improve their performance.

Chief editors' liability limited

THE SUPREME Constitutional Court, under Counsellor Awad El-Morr, has declared unconstitutional Paragraph 1 of Article 195 of the Penal Code, which places the criminal responsibility for offences committed by a newspaper, i.e. libel, on the shoulders of its editor-in-chief.

The Court based its ruling, handed down on Sunday, on the fact that the Constitution guarantees the freedom of the press and opposes government intervention in its affairs. A strong press is better able to lead a public debate, and, through the quality of its news and analysis, lead to the formation of a mature public opinion, the court added.

It is inconceivable, the court said, that the chief editor of a newspaper would be able to meticulously examine every article and report it contained. The editor-in-chief is, therefore, only fully responsible for the publication of a libelous article if he was aware of its scope and consequences and deliberately sought those consequences. Nevertheless, the court held that the editor-in-chief did bear some responsibility for the offence in his capacity as the supervisor of the newspaper's affairs in cases where the offence was not deliberate but the result of negligence in management. Negligence and deliberation are mutually exclusive opposites, the court declared.

The court concluded that the chief editor has only a civil responsibility for offences committed by his newspaper.

Lawsuit against Press Council

THE ADMINISTRATIVE court will rule on 16 February in the lawsuit filed by Mahmoud El-Tohami, editor-in-chief of the weekly magazine *Rose El-Youssef*, demanding that the Press Syndicate Council annul its decision to hold elections to fill the chairman's post.

El-Tohami's objective is to untangle a legal dispute and establish a legal precedent that the term of the syndicate's chairman is four years, thus allowing the current chairman, Ibrahim Nafie, to serve for two more years. The dispute is the result of conflicting interpretations of two laws that regulate the syndicate's activities.

Debating the development agenda

The government's plan to establish new communities in the Western and Sinai deserts simultaneously was criticised at a Book Fair seminar addressed by Minister of Local Administration Mahmoud Sherif. Jailan Halawi attended

The country's rapidly increasing population has made the reclamation of vast areas of desert land for homes, agriculture and industry a necessity, Mahmoud Sherif, minister of local administration, told a seminar at the Cairo Book Fair.

With the population expected to jump from its present 60 million to 85 million in the next 20 years, more living space has to be found, the minister argued. At present only five per cent of Egypt's area is inhabited, and "unless a change in Egypt's map is achieved" resources will fall short of the population's needs. Expanding out of the Nile Valley, therefore, "has become a necessity of life."

Work is already under way on a huge project to achieve this goal. Water is being channelled eastwards from the Nile, through the Al-Salam Canal, to irrigate parts of the Sinai Desert and other desert areas west of the Suez Canal, Sherif said in Saturday's debate.

Work began in January on another irrigation canal to cultivate the arid plains of the Western Desert. The 590km-long canal, named after Sheikh Zayed bin Sultan Al-Nahayan of the United Arab Emirates, will carry around 1.5 billion cubic metres of water from Lake Nasser, behind the Aswan High Dam, to a string of oases in the Western Desert.

"The project not only involves the construction of a new canal, but aims at the establishment of a new Delta, bustling with activities such as agriculture, industry, mining, education and tourism," Sherif said. He added that 2.2 million feddans of land will be put under cultivation and 25 industrial zones established.

The construction of the Al-Salam Canal will be completed in October at a cost of LE5.7 billion. The 240km-long canal begins at Faraskour near Damietta, runs eastward until it reaches the Suez Canal, which it crosses in four huge tunnels, before continuing eastward until it reaches a point south of El-Arish, the largest town in Sinai. The canal will provide Sinai with 14 million cubic metres of water daily.

By irrigating 620,000 feddans to both the east and west of the Suez Canal, El-Salam will establish a link between the Nile Delta and the Sinai Peninsula. Sinai, which makes up six per cent of Egypt's total area, will be the location for new urban communities absorbing as many as three million people, Sherif said. And, in the area west of the Suez Canal, the irrigation of 200,000 feddans of land in the governorates of Damietta, Port Said, Sharqiya and Ismailia, has been made possible.

Work on three out of the four tunnels running below the Suez Canal was completed last November. Once construction of the fourth tunnel is completed in May, Nile water will flow into Sinai for the first time to irrigate 400,000 feddans. "The cultivation of these areas will signal the birth of a new life. Villages and towns will be established, services provided and job opportunities created," Sherif said.

However, in a panel discussion following Sherif's address, Ragab El-Banna, editor-in-chief of *October* magazine, cast doubts on the government's development plans. He complained that Cairo continued to get the lion's share of the government's attention to the detriment of rural areas, particularly Upper Egypt. "Which is better," he asked, "to develop these rural areas, or reclaim the desert, starting from scratch and spending a lot of money?"

He suggested that instead of launching three mega-projects — the development of Sinai, the Western Desert and Upper Egypt — simultaneously, it would have been better to focus on one at a time.

But Sherif responded that there was no reason to focus on one project and delay the others. "We can work on them simultaneously," he said.

Cairo, which was planned for a population of two million people, is now home to 10 million, and other towns and cities are also over-populated, the minister said. "Population density has to be reduced in the villages, cities and capital of Egypt," he stressed. "What is required is a complete re-distribution of the population throughout the country."

El-Banna also raised questions about who stands to benefit from the government's plan and whether young people, who make up 40 per cent of the population, will have a share of these benefits.

In response, Sherif confirmed that the ownership of 25 per cent of the land in Sinai would be turned over to young people. To make the project a success would require "a pioneer spirit and plenty of hard work," he said.

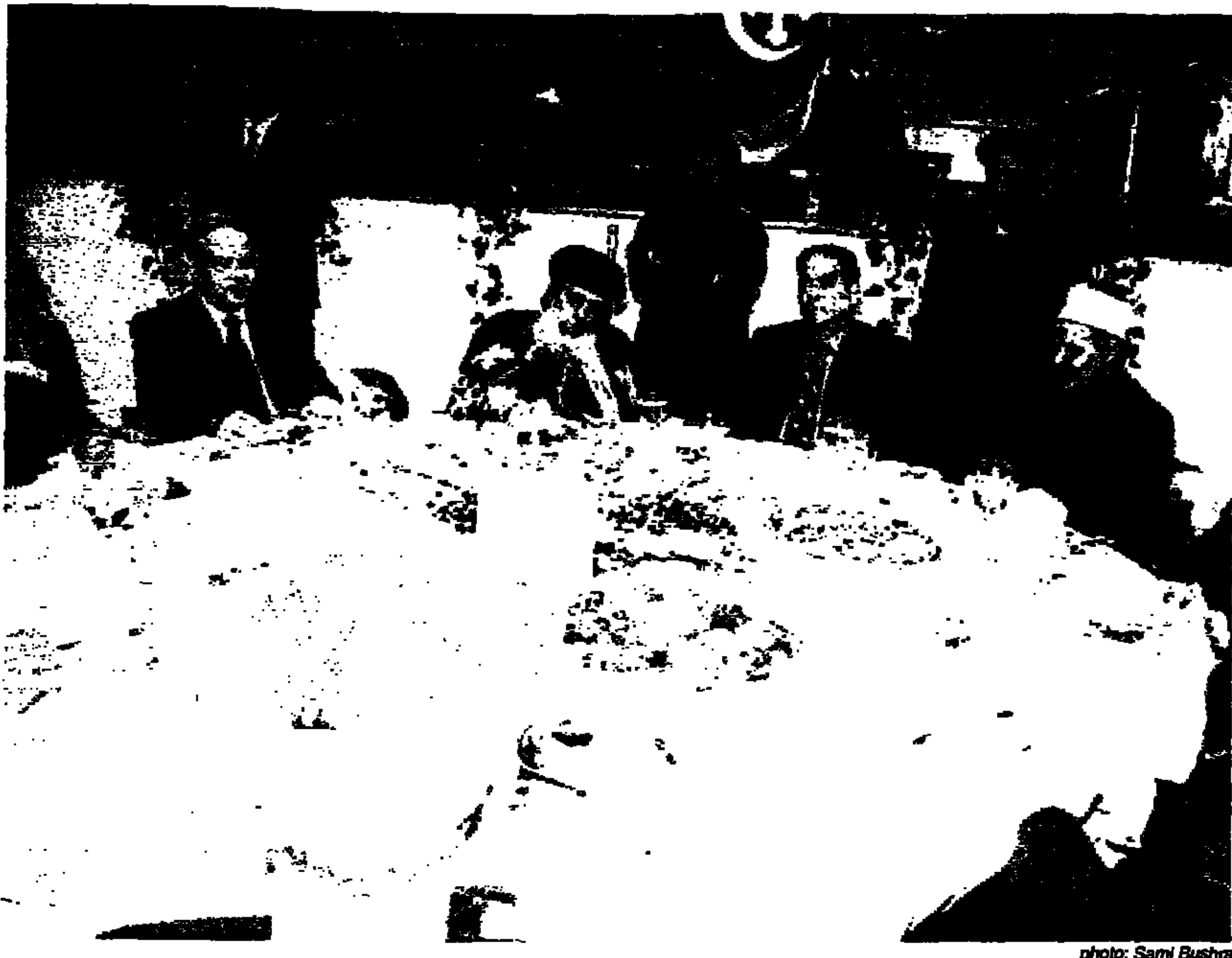


photo: Sami Bushra

Pope Shenouda III held a national unity *iftar* banquet at the patriarchate last week. Seated around the table (left to right) are Parliament Speaker Fathi Sorour, Pope Shenouda III, Prime Minister Kamal El-Ganzouri and Sheikh Mohamed Sayed Tantawi, the Grand Sheikh of Al-Azhar. Meanwhile, Anba Vicenti, bishop of Helwan and El-Ma'sara, held a similar banquet *at the monastery of Anba Barsoum El-Erian in Ma'sara last Sunday. Mohamed El-Ghamrawi, minister of state* for military production and Venice Kamel Gouda, minister of scientific research and technology, attended the *iftar*.

News analysis

Between Satanists and Islamists

As the media and the security bodies go into battle against another group of "strange-looking youth", **Diaa Rashwan** *questions the wisdom of dismissing social and cultural crises by easy reference to unsavory aliens*

In the midst of the festivities so distinct to Ramadan in Egypt, security authorities broke the news to the media: a new organisation, not of Islamists but of Satan worshippers, had been discovered and its members arrested. The media pounced on the news and gave it the widest coverage, dwelling elaborately on the 70 or so young men and women *taken* into custody for investigation by the state security prosecution, their strange clothes and the weird rituals and customs they performed in their worship of Satan.

The press unleashed its vocabulary of rhetoric, describing the "immoral," "corrupt" *group which has fallen into the abyss* of sin rendered even blacker for exercising such rituals during the holy month of Ramadan. Anger and anathema characterised *the reactions of the Egyptian public*, which was revolted both by the event and its timing. The topic immediately gained precedence over all other topics of conversation during the long hours of nocturnal entertainment in Ramadan. While the investigations continue, only a few alleged *cult members have been released*, (the majority being still held in police custody awaiting interrogation), and there is ample reason to believe that a parallel investigation to shed light on the case from another perspective is justifiable.

The first comment regarding the parallel investigation relates to the context in which the issue was presented by the security and investigation authorities on the one hand; and by the press on the other, to the public. The cult of devil worship was presented to the public in a manner which suggested that it was a secret "religious" sect characterised by structural features identical with those which characterise the banned Islamist organisations. Thus, in the first place, the case was turned over to the *state security investigation authority* mandated to keep a vigilant eye on political activities, particularly those of Islamists.

The defendants were later referred to the state security prosecution which has become, of late, practically the organ responsible for dealing with Islamist organ*isations. This procedure suggests first, that* we are addressing another religious "organisation," and second, that the charges levelled at the defendants by the national security and investigation authorities do not in essence differ from charges brought against Islamists for propagating "subversive" concepts *which* "threaten the beliefs and values of the society, deviate from the fundamental principles of true Islam or endeavour to alter the established foundations of the society".

Third, investigation authorities and the press have sought to borrow terms and *concepts from Islamist contexts, and have* compulsively and arbitrarily used such borrowed terms in the context of the alleged cult. Notably, the titles "*amir*" and "*na'ib* (deputy) *amir*" are being used to designate the first suspect and second suspect in the cult heirarchy. Alleged cult members are *said to* propagate their *ideas* through a "cluster-like" organisational structure which commonly characterises the structure of the secret Islamist organisations in Egypt.

In their presentation of cult members and Islamists, particularly of the more ex*tremist elements, security authorities* and the press have adopted an identical approach. Intensive focus was given to depicting the members *in* a manner which makes them distinct from other Egyptians. The Islamists are bearded, and clad in white *galabiyas*, trousers and head covers, *while* the *cult members wear* their hair in two styles, either very long or scalp bare, and are clad in black and sport tattoos.

The intensive focus on appearance and apparel which has created in the mind of the Egyptian public the stereotype of the Islamist (as bearded and dressed in white), has also created the stereotype of the cult member — long hair or scalp shaven, wearing black. In terms of relations with their families and their neighbours, cult members, similar to the case of Islamists in certain earlier phases, are said to be violent and aggressive toward other family members, *stealing household* money or property — acts which members of both groups allegedly justify under a multitude of pretexts.

Cult members and Islamists are also similar in their sexual behaviour. By virtue of its very nature, focus has been laid on the perverted sexual relations between the de*fendants in the cult* case, which *was* not brought against the Islamists for religious considerations, yet, libertine sexual behaviour has repeatedly been reported in the case of Islamists during the past two years.

Both the "terrorist" and the "Satanist" have been presented to the public by the se*curity* authorities *and the media* as *non*-human. They seem more akin to legendary figures or "beings" created by science fiction, than to humans living within specific social contexts with qualities that can be measured.

The security authorities and the press have been categorical in claiming that *perverts* who worship Satan — like terrorists — are types not indigenously bred within the Egyptian society. Both terrorist and cult worshipper *behave* as *aliens* and *nurture* concepts that are strange to the general accepted norms and standards of established society.

The appeal by the press to "knowledgeable psychologists and sociologists" proved once again a useful tool, which the press exploited limitlessly, to hammer down its stereotype of the Satan worshipper, as was the case with the stereotype of the terrorist.

To drive further its point and claim consensus for its own verdict, the press sought to mobilise the opinion of the largest number of people possible, ranging from ordinary Egyptians to prominent writers, politicians, art divas, *cultural* figures, sports stars, etc... to echo its claim that the Egyptian society denounces both, reassuring the public that the broad base of the society is "safely and soundly free" from such "deviant trends".

The second observation, which is related to the first, concerns *the timing chosen* for publicising the case. The story was made known to the public during Ramadan, within the context of the celebrations of Police Day and in the wake of a wide-scale campaign launched by *Rose El-Youssef*. The magazine had conducted a survey of the group, which it *dubbed* "*The Followers* of Satan." The campaign had undoubtedly played an important role in whetting the appetite of the security authorities for the case. This is explainable in terms of the wide-scale interest it had aroused both within the media and at the public level.

*The magazine, an anti-Islamist publica*tion, continuously highlights issues related to Islamist actions. The security authorities, who for long have focused on the Islamists and on their own role of protecting the society against all forms of "deviance", seemed eager to expand their activity to *new spheres. This may have been the very* reason for bringing the case of the cult to the attention of the Egyptian public during Ramadan and during the Police Day celebrations. Last but *not least*, however, the security authorities wished to take some action on the issue of the cult, after their long silence, a silence which *Rose El-Youssef* had been questioning for some time.

The third observation relates to the social class and age composition of the defendants. Information that has leaked out from the investigation records places the majority of the cult members in the 18-25 age group. They are said to come from upper *middle class or even upper* class families. The age composition of the cult members is identical with that of the Islamists — a fact, which in itself, may be reason enough to probe deeper into the nature of the generation crisis experienced by that specific age group, a crisis which has driven some to the ranks of the Islamists and has pushed others to join the devil cult.

On the other hand, the social composition of cult members and Islamists is rad*ically different. The majority of Islamists* belong to the lowest classes in the society and are mostly drawn from the rural areas. Cult members, on the other hand, are all centred in the capital or in major urban centres. Despite the strictly limited number of cult members, as compared to the membership of Islamist organisations, the disparity in social class itself raises questions regarding the truth about the social tensions in the country and the extent to which *such tensions spread* to affect various levels in the social hierarchy and thus produce protest phenomena. The two phenomena, which outwardly seem manifestations of "rebellion," are in essence vastly different.

The last observation relates to the role of information technology in propagating the Satanic cult in Egypt. Police investigation reports have so far revealed that travelling abroad and subscribing to the Internet have been the two major sources of exposure to cult ideas. In both cases, privileged social position and material wealth have rendered the weird concepts accessible to Egyptian youth.

The Internet, which is claimed to be the greater villain — more than travel abroad — *in breeding cult ideology in Egypt*, has raised a number of questions about the repercussions of computer-assisted communications on the traditional values and standards of the Egyptian society, and regarding ways to "protect our youth from harmful concepts and phenomena".

Consequently, many people following the case closely have rushed to blame foreign sources for allegedly corrupting "virtuous" Egyptian youth. We find the very same sources arguing that the Islamists are either the agents of foreign countries, or are simply victims deceived by the devious *ideas which bombard us from* beyond our borders.

The attempt to deal with the Satanist cult and with the Islamist organisations, (particularly with the more violent elements in both entities), as a single phenomenon, betrays an exaggerated and ar*bitrary approach in drawing conclusions*. The fact that they share limited similarities does not justify the identification of the two cases as a single phenomenon. The similarities are expressions of the underlying social crisis which plagues an entire generation of Egyptian youth, cutting *across social class*.

The two phenomena may be manifestations of the same social crisis, but the danger of an approach which obliterates differences and distinctions, and which tends to disregard borders, not only risks losing the only chance of identifying the nature of each, and the possibility of resolving the cases as best as possible, but also risks concealing and obliterating the essence of the social crisis which sustains such phenomena.

The most difficult and possibly the most urgent task is not that of heaping blame on the phenomena and rushing to assure the public — through political channels and the media — that it is a "perverted and deviant handful," a veritable alien body within the corps of "public consensus". What is needed is a genuine search for the true causes and factors which give rise to such phenomena (widely disparate as they may be) even if such an exercise would entail, renouncing our "deviant" stereotypes about the phenomena.

'No comment' on US rights report

The US State Department's report on human rights in 1996 triggered criticism in many Third World countries, and a restrained response in Cairo. **Khaled Dawoud** *reports*

A spokesperson for the Egyptian Foreign Ministry refused to comment on the section dealing with Egypt in this year's annual report *on human rights in the world* issued by the US State Department. The report, dealing with 1996, noted that in Egypt the "use of violence by security forces in the campaign against terrorists appeared more limited this year [1996] than in previous years." But it also maintained that "the security forces committed numerous human rights abuses."

Commenting, Naela Gabr, director of *the Human Rights Department at the For*eign Ministry, said the Egyptian government had received a copy of the report, which has been published annually by the State Department since 1977, on its day of issue. Gabr said the report was mainly aimed at assisting US congressmen in making decisions on the distribution of US aid.

Gabr told *Al-Ahram Weekly* that her department had carefully examined the report and submitted an assessment of it to Foreign Minister Amr Moussa. She therefore declined to comment on its contents, stating that this was Moussa's prerogative.

The 20-page report reviewed nearly all *aspects related to human rights in Egypt* in six main sections: respect for the integrity of the person, including freedom from political and other extrajudicial killings, disappearance, torture, arbitrary arrest, denial of fair public trial and arbitrary interference with privacy; respect for civil *liberties*; respect *for political* rights — the right of citizens to change their government; the government's attitude regarding international and non-governmental investigation of alleged violations of human rights; discrimination based on race, sex, religion, disability, language or social status; and workers' rights.

The report maintained that the ruling National Democratic Party continued to dominate the political scene, "to such an extent that citizens do not have a meaningful ability to change their government." Meanwhile, "the security forces and *terrorist* groups remained locked in a cycle of violence."

In their fight with Islamist terrorists, the Egyptian security forces resorted to tor*ture, arbitrary arrests*, prolonged detention without trial and excessive violence, the American report alleged. It also criticised the trial of Islamist militants before military courts, noting that 10 death sentences were handed down by these courts against Islamist militants during 1996.

Nevertheless, Islamist militants, whom the report labelled as terrorists, were held responsible for most of the violence which took place in 1996. According to the report, police killed 34 militants in 1996 while 132 people, including police and civilians, were killed by militants, *mostly members of Al-Gama'a* Al-Islamiya.

The terrorist attack against Greek tourists on the Pyramids Road last April, in which 18 Greeks were killed, was singled out for particular mention. This attack, the report said, "brought the largest casualty count from a single incident in Egypt's modern history." However, there was a sharp decline in the number of *deaths resulting from extremist action in* 1996, in contrast to the steady increase over the previous four years, the report added.

On the question of freedom of expression, the report noted that "citizens generally express themselves freely [but] the government continues to place significant limitations on freedom of the press." While acknowledging that opposition par*ties receive a subsidy from the govern*ment and can freely publish their own newspapers, the report alleges that in some cases opposition newspapers also receive subsidies from foreign sources.

A spokesman for the US Embassy in Cairo told the *Weekly* that his government has not yet received an official response from Egypt.

The spokesman, rejecting the charge that the US State Department's human rights reports amounted to interference in the domestic affairs of other countries, reaffirmed one of the report's main conclusions regarding Egypt, which is that there was a relative improvement in the country's human rights record last year. However, *he refused* to go into details, saying that the report "speaks for itself."

As every year, the US State Department's human rights report has triggered criticism — in particular, questioning Washington's mandate to assess human rights in other countries. Nearly every country *which has been attacked in the reports*, such as China, Iraq, Sudan and Mianamar, has reacted strongly, maintaining that the United States should focus instead on improving its own record, particularly in terms of racial discrimination against African Americans and minorities. *(see p.7)*

Wafd boycotts municipal elections

The Wafd Party, despairing that the government will respond to its demand for political reform, has decided to boycott municipal elections scheduled for April, reports **Shaden Shehab**

The liberal Wafd Party decided last week to boycott local council elections scheduled for 6 April, claiming that the ballot is bound to be rigged. A statement issued by *the Wafd's Supreme Com*mittee said the government had turned a deaf ear to its demand for comprehensive political reform "based on respect for the sovereignty of the people and the will of the nation."

Claiming that rigged lists of voters would be used in the elections, the statement said: "Nobody can deny that rigging *the elections and* falsifying the will of the people undermine the very foundations of democracy."

Youssef Wali, secretary-general of the ruling National Democratic Party (NDP), shrugged off the Wafd's boycott. "The Wafd's decision concerns the Wafd alone," Wali said, recalling that the party had boycotted the 1990 parliamentary elections and then reversed this position in 1995.

Yassin Serageddin, who leads the five Wafdist deputies in the People's Assembly, told *Al-Ahram Weekly*: "the Wafd's experience in the last parliamentary elections was a bitter one. We decided to participate in the elections after the government promised to be impartial, but we could not stop the government rigging the results. So what is the use of contesting the local council elections?"

Asked whether the Wafd was coordinating its position with other opposition parties, Serageddin replied: "We tried to take a collective decision in the past, but some parties promise one thing and then do another."

The Wafd's statement said it had decided to boycott the April ballot to "give expression to the general state of dissatisfaction with rigging and manipulating the will of the nation, which reached unprecedented levels in the last parliamentary elections." The boycott was also intended to "show solidarity with voters whose will was falsified and with candidates whose rights were denied," the statement said.

It said court decisions nullifying the results of the parliamentary elections in many constituencies had been ignored by the People's Assembly on the grounds that the Assembly is "the master of its own decisions." Moreover, the government "continues to refuse to open the dossier of political reform and insists on monopolising authority, regardless of the will of the voters," the statement said. After the first round of the 1995 elections, administrative courts were showered with complaints filed by losing candidates who sought to have election results annulled because of alleged fraud. On 6 December 1995 the administrative court *ruled that the results of the* first round *in more* than 50 constituencies were null and void. And yet the government went ahead with the second round, after filing an appeal with the Supreme Administrative Court. With the number of lawsuits rising in the following days, administrative courts ruled that election results were invalid *in 109* out of the 222 constituencies in which results were being contested. The Interior Ministry contested those rulings but lost, which prompted opposition figures to call for the disbanding of the Assembly and for new elections to be held.

A new law stating that the local council elections be held on the basis of individual candidacy was passed by the People's Assembly last summer. The new law became necessary after the Supreme Constitutional Court ruled in February that a 1979 law, sanctioning a combination of the party slate and individual candidacy systems, was unconstitutional. The old law, the court said, discriminated against candidates unaffiliated to political parties.



Train disaster

A CARGO train slammed into the rear of a passenger train near Edfu in southern Egypt on Monday, killing 11 people and seriously wounding 10 others.

The passenger train, which was heading from Alexandria to Aswan, had stopped at Al-Radisiyeh station, 10km south of Edfu, around 6am. At the same time, the driver of the cargo train, heading south on the same tracks, failed to spot the stationary *train ahead of him*. The collision wrecked the front of the cargo train and the carriages of the passenger train, disrupting railway traffic in the area for six hours.

An official at the National Railway Authority blamed the disaster on an error made by either the local traffic controller or the driver of the freight train. Prosecutors ordered the two remanded in custody for four days.

Two faces of the Iranian Left

Almost 20 years after the Iranian revolution, Walid Abdel-Nasser examines the transformation of the Islamic Left in Iran

On the occasion of the 18th anniversary of the 1979 Iranian Revolution and at the outset of the Iranian presidential elections, one ideological and political phenomenon that deserves a profound reading is the composition and stands of the "Islamic Left", particularly if one adopts a comparative perspective that takes into account the evolution of domestic events in Iran since the victory of the 1979 Revolution.

Similarities as well as differences exist among the forces, groups and intellectuals that comprised the Islamic Left in the early years of the 1979 Revolution and their stands, and those who compose that "Left" today. Sixteen years ago the main representative of the Islamic Left in Iran was the Mujahidi Khalq Organisation, led by Masud Rajair, along with sectors of followers of the late Dr Ali Shari'ati (d. 1977) and the late Ayatullah Taliqani (d. 1979), as well as some other minor groups. Today the situation has evolved in a drastically different direction: the Mujahidi Khalq Organisation was banned and new forces have risen to represent the Islamic Left within the framework of the current political system in Iran. Among these are significant segments from within the religious institution: a characteristic that hardly existed in the early years of the revolution.

Figures in the "New Islamic Left" include former Prime Minister Mir Hussin Mussair, former Parliament Speaker Mahdi Krub, former Minister of Interior Ali Akbar Muhtashimi and the leader of the student group that held American hostages at the US Embassy in Tehran in November 1979, Musair Khu'inha. The main organisation that represents the Islamic Left today in Iran is Mujama' Ruhanium Mubariz (The League of Militant Clergymen). However, other groups and elements exist as well in the framework of the Islamic Left. All these forces abide by the teachings of the late Ayatullah Khomeini and operate within the boundaries of the current political system in Iran.

A significant similarity between the Islamic Left today and that which existed in the first two and half years of the revolution is the fact that the assessment of the domestic political situation led both of them to similar conclusions in 1980-81 and 1996-97. In both cases, the Islamic Left decided to support what it evaluated as the liberal Islamic trend (represented by former President Bani Sadr and his followers in 1980-81, and by current President Rafsanjani and his supporters in 1996-97) in face of the conservative Islamic trend (represented by the Islamic Republican Party in 1980-81 and by Parliament Speaker Ali Akbar Natiq Nuri and his group in 1996-97). In both periods, the assumption that led the Islamic leftist forces to that conclusion was that the progressive Islamic trend — which the Islamic Left represents — is not a potential political alternative to the existing government.

The main motivation in both cases for the Islamic Left to support the liberal Islamic trend was the conviction on the part of the Islamic Left that the liberal Islamic trend is more tolerant and open-minded — or even committed — towards some form of political pluralism and an extended margin of freedom of the media. Such a situation could provide the opportunity for the Islamic Left — once the liberal Islamic trend is in control of political power — to consolidate its presence in and impact on Iran's political, cultural and social setting; to propagate its ideas with a view to broadening its popular basis that would enable it at a certain later point to propose itself as a viable political alternative.

This position of the Islamic Left also represents attempts to break the monopoly over various forms of authority by the conservative right and protests against the policies of exclusion practiced by that right both in 1980-81 and again in 1996-97. Therefore, in both cases, it was only normal for the Islamic Left in Iran to avoid its marginalisation by seeking involvement in state institutions and direct political participation through alliance with the more relatively liberal, pragmatic and technocratic trend in the ruling institutions.

In fact, both President Bani Sadr in 1980-81 and President Rafsanjani in 1996-97 forged electoral alliances with the Islamic Left — or at least segments of this trend — during the legislative elections of April 1980 and March 1996 successively, although the former was far more comprehensive and relatively long standing than the latter. Yet, in both cases, such alliances did not help either party — the Islamic Left or the liberal Islamic trend — in achieving the common objective: a parliamentary majority at the *majlis* (assembly). In both cases, that outcome went to their common rival, namely the conservative Islamic trend. Moreover, a number of the candidates of the Islamic Left in both instances were declared ineligible to run for the elections by the Council of Guardians or its subsidiary organs.

A second point of similarity between the stands of the Islamic Left in Iran in 1979 and in 1996-97, has been the movement towards escalation by the government against the United States of America. In 1980 and 1981, the Mujahidi Khalq Organisation refused to accede to the notion of unifying the domestic front in Iran against the "American threat" at the expense of democratic freedoms and rights to all revolutionary political forces.

The current Islamic Left inside Iran also warns against the continuous mobilisation against the US by the conservative Islamic trend. In both cases, a common concern for the Islamic Left might be the fear of being gradually stripped of the cards it holds, in this case the deep-rooted and genuine opposition to the American hegemonistic plans towards Iran.

In 1980-81, the decision of the Islamic Left in Iran to support former President Bani Sadr did not save the latter from defeat at the hands of the Islamic Republican Party, and eventually the Mujahidi Khalq Organisation had to go underground and thereafter into exile. It remains to be seen what destiny would befall the alliance between the Islamic Left in Iran today and the liberal-technocratic Islamic trend — if actually such alliance is to continue — and what implications this alliance would entail for the ideological paradigm and political stands of the Islamic Left in Iran even if these implications are to be gradual and long-term.

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MARTYR'S STREET: For the first time since the 1994 Hebron mosque massacre of Arabs by a Jewish settler, Shuhada Street (Martyrs' street) was opened last Monday. Israeli authorities announced the street would be opened in stages over a four-month period. Palestinian ambulances, taxis and municipal traffic were among the first allowed through. Pictured left, a Palestinian carries a turkey on his way to the central market area. In the background, an Israeli policeman checks a Palestinian driver wishing to enter the newly-opened road. The truck was denied entrance. *(photo: Reuter)*

The fire next time?

Graham Usher examines the significance of the rapprochement between Lebanon's Palestinian factions

"1997 will be the year of surprises," said Munir Makdeh on New Year's Eve. Makdeh is a Palestinian from the Ain Helwah refugee camp near Sidon housing around 60,000 refugees. It is the largest of the 12 remaining Palestinian refugee camps in Lebanon.

Makdeh is also the leader of Yasser Arafat's Fatah movement in Ain Helwah. In 1993, he threatened to kill the PLO leader for signing the Oslo Accords with Israel, an agreement many of Lebanon's Palestinian refugees saw as the PLO's final abandonment of their right to return to their homes in what was pre-1948 Mandate Palestine and is now Israel.

With his trim beard and empty gun holster, Makdeh and his followers are the legatees of Fatah's revolutionary era, when national liberation was a matter of armed struggle rather than negotiations. They rule Ain Helwah "by force", says a camp resident, but it is a force buoyed by popular discontent.

In November 1994 and June 1995, gun battles erupted between Arafat loyalists and Makdeh's dissidents in Ain Helwah. Makdeh won. As for "surprises", the first occurred on 6 January this year when the 175,000 Palestinians living in Lebanon's camps staged a one-day general strike in protest at the deterioration of camp services run by the UN agency for Palestinian refugees, UNRWA.

In Ain Helwah, Palestinian youths brandished rifles and lit burning tyres. It was a warning. "This place will explode," says a camp resident. "But the cause will not be Oslo or the right of return. It will be poverty."

Of the estimated 3.1 million registered Palestinian refugees living in the Occupied Territories and the Diaspora, the status of those in Lebanon is the most precarious. Once the cradle of the PLO, Lebanon's Palestinians have suffered a series of near mortal blows over the last 15 years, testing their capacity for resistance and survival to the limit.

Following Israel's 1982 invasion, the PLO was forced to evacuate Lebanon, taking many of the camps' ablest leaders to Tunis and thence to the West Bank and Gaza. Between 1985-87, Lebanon's Shiite Amal movement (backed by Syria) attacked Palestinian refugee camps to prevent the PLO's political rehabilitation in Lebanon. These attacks caused the deaths of about 2,500 Palestinians and Lebanese and the estimated destruction of 60 per cent of the camps' infrastructure. The 1990-91 Gulf War resulted in a mass expulsion of Palestinians employed in Kuwait and Lebanon and, with them, the final drying up of all PLO-funded services, causing an average camp unemployment rate of at least 40 per cent. Finally, the Oslo Accords triggered a shift in aid priority in UNRWA and international NGOs away from Lebanon and the Diaspora in favour of the Palestinian "self rule" areas of Gaza and the West Bank.

The sum political impact of these setbacks is expressed by a Palestinian woman from Ain Helwah. "It's *towteen* they're cooking up for us. Next year, they'll start implementing it," she said. *Towteen* is the Arabic word for implantation or settlement and, in Lebanon, means the Israeli-US-driven solution to the refugee problem. This entails giving to the Palestinians outside of Palestine permanent residency in their countries of abode.

Would Lebanon's Palestinians accept *towteen*? The Lebanese government does not give them the option. If there is one issue that unites all of Lebanon's confessional groups, it is opposition to *towteen* in particular and to the Palestinian presence in Lebanon in general. This is not just expressed in attitudes like that of Lebanon's foreign minister, Faris Boeiz who, in April 1994, said that Lebanon's ultimate goal was to "rid itself" of all its Palestinian residents. It is written into Lebanese law.

Unlike refugees in Syria and Jordan, Palestinians in Lebanon are not allowed to work in the host economy. In the past, they managed by working in the camps for the PLO or, illegally, as cheap labour for whichever Lebanese employer would take them. But now, even this door is being closed. The last decade has seen the Syrian migrant workforce in Lebanon swell to between 500,000 and one million. These migrants are taking the menial jobs the Lebanese refuse to take on but the Palestinians used to do.

The gravest threat to the Palestinians is the Lebanese government's September 1995 decree forcing all resident Palestinians living or studying abroad to obtain visas to re-enter the country. Since then, most Lebanese embassies simply have refused to issue visas for Lebanon's Palestinians. The result, says Palestinian lawyer Suheil Natour, is that "almost 100,000 Palestinians have lost their residency rights in Lebanon in the last year," reducing the overall Palestinian population in the country from approximately 350,000 to 250,000. UNRWA officials say such figures are probably accurate.

Palestinians say the problem is compounded by their lack of political representation in Lebanon. Angered by Arafat's acceptance of the Oslo Accords without securing from Israel at least the principle of their right to return to their homeland, most Palestinians in Lebanon feel abandoned by the PLO and view the Palestinian Authority (PA) in the West Bank and Gaza as little more than an Israeli agent. However, they also chide the PLO opposition for its lack of alternative to Oslo. Nor does their secular nationalism square with Palestinian Islamist opposition groups like Hamas and Islamic Jihad.

Is there any hope on the horizon? Two months ago, Makdeh's dissidents were reconciled with Arafat's main loyalist in Lebanon, the Fatah leader Sultan Abu Anaim. "The PLO leadership made a mistake with Oslo," says Makdeh today. "But there is no longer a fight between us."

For a people that has been bloodied by inter-Arab and inter-Palestinian feuds almost as much as by its resistance to Israel, national unity is of primary importance. It is a rapprochement Israel and the Lebanese government should also heed. It was the reunification of the PLO factions in 1987 that laid the political bases for the Intifada in the Occupied Territories. As shown by the protests on 6 January, a new unity may start a similar fire among the Palestinians in Lebanon.

Zeroual loses a strong ally

The killing of the Algerian Workers' Federation president, Abdel Haq Bin Hammouda, by suspected Islamist militants has meant the loss of a strong supporter of the government of Algerian President Liamine Zeroual, Khaled Dawoud reports

It has not been easy for the Algerian government to muster a strong base of support since the outbreak of bloody violence in 1992, triggered when the army seized power and cancelled election results in the first round of parliamentary elections, won by the Islamic Salvation Front, FIS. The two million member Algerian Workers Federation, headed by Bin Hamouda, remains one of the few influential establishments which maintains its support of Zeroual's hardline policy in dealing with the country's Islamists.

Bin Hamouda had been the target of several assassination attempts since 1992, losing his brother and cousin to one such attempt in 1994. When the suspected militants attacked him and his two guards on 28 January, in front of the workers Federation headquarters, he reportedly fired back at his attackers, resisting until the last minute.

As life came to a halt across the country, President Zeroual headed the thousands of Algerians who took part in Bin Hamouda's funeral. The assassination has occurred at a time when Algeria is witnessing a string of brutal killings, carried out by suspected members of the Armed Islamic Group, GIA, against innocent civilians.

At least 300 people have been killed since the beginning of the Muslim holy month of Ramadan, undermining claims by the Algerian government that it has won the battle against Muslim militants.

Hamouda's death is fuelling speculation in Algeria, with claims by non-Islamist opposition figures that he may have been a victim of an internal power struggle within the regime. Those who spread such claims note that Bin Hamouda was assassinated in spite of heavy police protection, and that his assassins were professional killers who not only managed to overpower Bin Hammouda's guards, but also escaped in a police patrolled area.

The Algerian press has also reported that shortly before Bin Hamouda's assassination he was nominated by President Zeroual to head a pro-government party, which it was hoped would replace the outgoing National Liberation Front that led Algeria's independence war against the French. The NLF was ousted from power following the army's takeover in 1992 and the resignation of former Algerian President Chadli Benjedid who was later accused of striking a deal with the FIS to share power. Appointing Bin Hamouda to such a top post may have angered others within the regime vying for this same position.

But the Algerian government ruled out speculation by the opposition, holding the militant Islamic groups solely responsible for the killing. A few days after the attack, a group named the Islamic Jihad Front claimed responsibility for Bin Hamouda's killing. A FIS figure in exile was quoted as saying that this group split from the GIS as a result of its extreme hardline stance, and that its ideology brands all of society "infidel" as a result of its failure to rebel against the ruling regime.

In May 1994, Hamouda visited Cairo to take part in an Arab League meeting of Arab labour ministers. He spoke to the *Weekly* about his views on the Algerian crisis. Nearly three years on, little has changed beyond the number of victims claimed by Algeria's ongoing violence. Indeed in those three years alone, casualties have doubled from 30,000 to 60,000, reflecting the tragedy of the Algerian situation.

Below are extracts from the unpublished interview.

"The Algerian Workers Federation does not oppose dialogue in itself, but believes that there are several issues which have to be settled first before heading down this path. The most important of these questions is that of blood: Terrorists have spilled the blood of so many innocent people, and if we conducted dialogue without settling this issue, it would be doomed to failure. The majority of those killed by terrorists were innocent victims with no political affiliations. They included peasants, workers, trade unionists, journalists and doctors, proving that terrorism has affected all stratas of the Algerian society. We cannot initiate dialogue before punishing all those who committed such crimes. The state is the sole party which has the right to use force against individuals or groups who violate the law.

"Those who started the process of physical liquidation and killing were members of the FIS. Even if we supposed the terrorist groups had a case to fight for, they should not make the Algerian people pay the price for that, and their struggle should only be against the government. The main party responsible for the political and security deterioration in Algeria is the FIS led by Abbas Madani.

"Even if we supposed that the FIS were an integral part of the society, how could those who protect society burn 69 schools, thousands of public transportation means and factories and kill innocent civilians without mercy.

"All Algerians opt for dialogue in order to restore security and stability. In this respect, President Zeroual has announced certain measures aimed at avoiding further confrontation. These included closing down several detention centres, releasing thousands of prisoners and a few FIS leaders and suspending execution sentences issued against those who took part in terrorist acts. But what was the response? More violence by the FIS."

Document

The Copenhagen Declaration: International Alliance For Arab-Israeli Peace, 30 January 1997

Egyptians, Israelis, Jordanians, Palestinians and peace loving people from all over the world are gathered in Copenhagen to establish an international alliance for Arab-Israeli peace. Peace is too important to be left only to governments. People-to-people contacts are vital to the success of the peace efforts in the region. As long as the popular base remains weak, the peace process may falter. We are gathering in Copenhagen to contribute to a comprehensive and lasting resolution to the Arab-Israeli conflict before the end of this century, and to commence an era of durable and just peace in which the whole Middle East should enjoy stability, security and prosperity.

We are meeting under the auspices of the government of Denmark which shares our interest in bringing about a resolution to the Arab-Israeli conflict in all its aspects. The absence of such resolution can only adversely affect the interests of the entire international community.

We plan to hold public meetings, lobby governments, monitor progress and setbacks in the peace-process as well as discrimination, collective punishment, abuse of human rights and violence. We will mobilise public opinion behind the peace effort.

So much has been achieved in peace making between Arabs and Israelis, which has led to the Egyptian-Israeli disengagement in January 1974, the Syrian-Israeli disengagement in September 1975, the Camp David Accords in September 1978, the Egyptian-Israeli peace treaty in March 1979, the Middle East Peace Process initiated in Madrid in October 1991, the Palestinian-Israeli Declaration of Principles in September 1993, the Palestinian-Israeli Cairo agreement in May 1994, the Washington Declaration between Jordan and Israel in July 1994, the Jordanian-Israeli peace treaty in October 1994, the Palestinian-Israeli interim agreement in September 1995, and the Declaration of the Peace Makers summit in Sharm El-Sheikh in March 1996 and the recent Hebron agreement.

We are deeply concerned about the stalemate on the Israeli-Syrian, Israeli-Lebanese tracks, about possible deadlocks in the Israeli-Palestinian negotiations over the implementation of the interim agreement, and about the eruption of violence that has in the past led to the loss of Arab and Israeli lives.

We recognise that there is still a long way to go before the true vision of peace is translated into reality, that the hope for the attainment of comprehensive peace, leading to regional cooperation and a better life for all peoples of the Middle East may yet be dashed and that the peace process could yet be derailed with the shadow of war again engulfing the Middle East. Justice and equality are preconditions for peace.

We realise that we cannot afford to watch passively resurgent dangers and the rise of new ones against the peace process. Peace is too precious and war too abhorrent for us to sit idly by while a deterioration takes place.

We are convinced that we reflect the will of the majority of the peoples in this region who yearn for an end to the Arab-Israeli conflict as a prelude to establishing peaceful regional cooperation, we voice the feelings prevalent among Arabs and Israelis that we, the people, must participate effectively in charting the course of the future of the Middle East by not allowing anti-peace forces to prevail.

We aim at the achievement of lasting and comprehensive peace based on the formula of land for peace, the implementation of UN Security Council resolutions 242 and 338 in all their aspects.

We consider that the foundations for peace among the Arab and Israeli peoples should be based on equal and balanced rights for all. In addition to the implementation of resolutions 242 and 338, it is important to deal with the underlying causes of Middle East wars and conflicts and to support both Arabs and Israelis to come to mutually acceptable terms.

We reaffirm our determination to promote peaceful coexistence, mutual respect, dignity and security among the peoples of a region that is free of all kinds of violence, and to pursue avenues for harmony and reconciliation that match the global transformations in the post-Cold War era.

We need each other and we are determined to close ranks with all peace loving people to attain these objectives. In order to do that, the signatories to this declaration have agreed on the following:

I. The attainment of peace between the Israeli and Palestinian peoples will resolve the core problem of the Arab-Israeli conflict. We, the International Alliance for Peace, call on concerned governments to act vigorously and speed up the full implementation of the Israeli-Palestinian agreements in letter and spirit, faithfully and honestly, and particularly to restore full normality to and improvement of the lives of the Palestinians. We call on the Israeli government and the Palestinian National Authority (PNA) to reach fair agreement on all outstanding final status issues (Jerusalem, refugees, settlements, borders, security and water) as soon as possible, certainly no later than May 5, 1999 as stipulated in the Oslo Accords. Jerusalem, in particular, is a deeply sensitive and central issue to all parties. Special attention, therefore, should be paid to this issue in the final status negotiations to satisfy the requirements of all the parties. The final agreement between Israel and the PLO must allow the Palestinian people to exercise their right to self-determination, including statehood, in accordance with international laws upon reaching an agreed settlement on the final status between them. To create an atmosphere of amity for negotiations, no resort to violence or terrorism in any form should be accepted or condoned. To allay Palestinian fears, no new settlements should be built, and no Palestinian land, state or private will be expropriated.

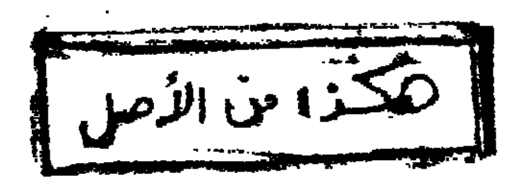
II. We, members of the Alliance, believe that comprehensive peace must be the true goal of all political efforts from within and outside the region. Renewed efforts must be made to reach a peaceful settlement between Israel and Syria and Israel and Lebanon based on the land-for-peace formula and on UN resolutions 242, 338 and 425. This settlement must include maximum mutual security for the parties as well as normal relations between them. Comprehensive peace should allow for a region free from weapons of mass destruction and their delivery systems, a Middle East in which economic potentials are harnessed for the prosperity of its inhabitants, and steps should be taken to achieve these goals.

III. We urge all forces in the Middle East to join hands to rebuild a region free from arms race and free from strife and poverty. In this noble endeavour, we will seize every opportunity, knock on every door, lobby every government and attempt to spread our vision to serve the interests of present and future generation. To guarantee success and continuity the members of the Alliance pledge concerted efforts to stand up to the enemies of peace.

IV. In order to ensure sustainability of our drive for peace, a permanent secretariat for the Alliance will be established. Our slogan henceforth will be "Let the State of War end, let the State of Peace begin."

V. In this vein, the founders of the Alliance invite regional and international groups and individuals concerned with the future of the region to adhere to our declaration, join our movement and support actively its causes and goals.

VII. The founding members of the International Alliance for Arab-Israeli peace extend their deep appreciation and gratitude to the people and government of Denmark for their sincere efforts and generous hospitality, which have been instrumental in materialising our cause.



Articulating discontent

Clash of the Titans? In the last of our Ramadan debates, Fred Halliday and Tarek El-Bishri discuss generalisations and specificity with Yasmin Allam **and** Aziza Sami**. The consensus: the Islamic threat is an implausible construction. But are economics the only criterion? Or is cultural conflict in the offing?**

Fred Halliday is Professor of International Relations at the London School of Economics, and has a special interest in the history and politics of the Middle East. His published work includes Arabia Without Sultans *and most recently* Islam and the Myth of Confrontation.

Why do many Western writers tend to resort to selective interpretations of history in attempting to explain relations between Islam and the West?

It is, in the first place, misleading to talk of "the West" or Islam as unitary subjects, across time, across states, across the very real social, political and ideological visions that exist in the West and between — as well as within — Muslim countries. It is easy and often tempting to talk in these terms, but often quite false to do so. There is no unified Western discourse on the Middle East or the Islamic world (and the two are far from being the same thing), just as there is no unified Middle Eastern or Third World discourse on the West.

The explanation for such false generalisations, where they do occur, is multiple. All political conflict, whether within or between states, involves the invocation of history and the use of that history, and of religious texts derived from that history, for selective purposes. It was Renan who said that getting your history wrong is part of being a nation. The same goes for relations between states today and for discussions of religion.

The past does not give the answer to present problems — it does, however, provide a reserve, as do holy texts, that can be used to justify whatever position you want to take up today. So the first answer to this question is that there are issues in dispute today in which history is available as a source, not of explanation (which it should be), but of legitimation. The most obvious examples of this are disputes over territory.

In your opinion, why does the West consider Islamic civilisation a threat to its existence? Is there, in fact, a unitary Islamic threat to the West, or is the perceived threat of Islamic confrontation indeed little more than a myth?

The discussion of the Muslim world in the West today is fuelled by several misleading factors. One is the issue of military conflict in the Middle East. In real terms, there has not been an Islamic military threat to Europe since the defeat of the Ottomans at the gates of Vienna in 1683. But a host of current questions, such as Iraq's threats to its neighbours or the question of nuclear proliferation, can be presented as an 'Islamic' threat. These questions are not Islamic, any more than the British or French nuclear bomb is a 'Christian' bomb, or Israel's 300 warheads are "Judaic".

A second factor is the issue of migration, to Europe above all. The issue of migration takes the form of a 'fear' of Islam in many countries: here, what is more properly a form of racism is presented in religious terms. A third factor is, however, the demagogy of the Islamist movements themselves, which, in a mirror image of some Western arguments, espouses the idea of a conflict between the West and the Muslim world and of unitary Islamic politics.

One has, moreover, to look at different countries for different explanations — the example of India, perhaps the country where there is more overt prejudice against Muslims in political discourse than in any other in the world, should warn us against assuming that such ideas only exist in the West.

Of course the idea of a Muslim threat is nonsense. The problems that do exist have other causes and rationales. There are 54 Islamic countries today and they pursue their own distinct foreign policies. All trade and interact with the non-Muslim world in varying ways. If they do pose threats — to invade their neighbours, acquire nuclear weapons, support terrorism — they do so as a result of state, not religious, interests. Moreover, none of the reprehensible things that some Muslim states may do are specific to the Muslim world. The main terrorist threats in Europe and the US have not come from the Islamic world anyway — look at the IRA, ETA or the Oklahoma bombers.

When we come to explain why this myth arises there is often an appealing, but actually facile, resort to the 'necessary threat' argument. According to this view, the West lost an enemy in Communism after 1989, and has now had to reinvent one in the form of Islam.

This is not a convincing argument, for several reasons. First of all the West did not invent the Communist threat — it existed, as Lenin, Stalin and Khruschev would have been the first to state themselves. The USSR did participate in an arms race, and a competition for influence in the Third World, that was not illusory. Anyone familiar with Egyptian history from 1955 to 1974, will know this.

Secondly, the underlying assumption of this 'necessary threat' argument is that somehow the Western world needs an external enemy. I fail to see why this is. Of course, external challenge can galvanise states and societies. But what the West, in the form of the industrialised democracies, wants is basically a world as much like itself as possible, with which it can trade, enjoy peaceful relations and so on. This is the truth of what Marx wrote in the *Communist Manifesto*, about capitalism transforming the world in its own image. Within this there are threats, but they are in large part those of economic competition: if there is a threat to the West today it comes from the industrialisation of the Far East and the shift of power to the Pacific.

On this scale, the Middle East does not count — it is, with Africa, largely outside the economic transformations of recent times. Oil money has masked this marginalisation, but in comparative terms the Middle East has missed out on the changes in the world economy over the past three decades. This is what makes talk of an Islamic threat so false. It should also lead one to doubt how far the kinds of solution being posed by fundamentalists or cultural nationalists in the Middle East really address the problem. They do not, in my view, have an answer on this front.

What are we to make of the case of Iran, where religious and anti-Western rhetoric have gone hand in hand — have incidents such as the Salman Rushdie affair helped shape perceptions of a hostile and aggressive Islam?

The case of Iran is, like that of every other Islamic country, specific, but there are also general lessons, if not those which either the Islamic revolutionaries or the Western anti-Muslimists would like to draw. What happened in Iran has been presented as a triumph of Islam, as something that can only be explained by Islam.

I accept that challenge and have tried in my book to provide an alternative explanation. First of all, the causes of the revolution were eminently real, secular causes — inequality of wealth, corruption, dictatorship, anti-Western feeling. There is nothing especially Islamic or specifically Iranian about these causes.

Secondly, for all the invocation of Islam, Khomeini's ideology was heavily dependent on Western radical and populist ideas. After all, his two main slogans were 'Revolution' and 'Republic', two terms that I defy anyone to find in the Qur'an. His world view was that of a struggle between oppressors and oppressed, and of the poor peoples of the world struggling against Western dominance. He talked of progress, and even celebrated May Day.

Moreover, while Khomeini himself claimed to be implementing the one 'true' Islam, most Muslims do not accept his interpretation of Islamic government, and the very ideas he put forward were a modern reformulation, not traditional at all. Finally, if we look at what the Islamic Republic of Iran has done since 1979, rather than what it has said it is doing, we see a revolutionary state behaving as other revolutionary states have done — consolidating state power, isolating and destroying its discarded allies within the country, clashing with neighbouring states, exporting revolution to other countries in the region, oscillating between rhetorical confrontation and tactical accommodation with the outside world.

The Rushdie affair was part of this politics — an attempt to rally flagging anti-Western opinion within Iran, and to reassert Iran's leadership of radical sentiment in the Islamic world. The persecution of writers for blasphemy is an old ploy of challenged authorities — look at Socrates, Christ, Spinoza, Galileo. The campaigns against them, like that against Rushdie, were secular.

What do you think of Huntington's reduction of the whole issue to a "clash of civilisations"?

Professor Huntington is an intelligent man, but this is a bad argument. Culture has rarely been the basis for conflict in the international system and is not so today. If one looks at relations between the Ottoman Empire and Europe we see periods of conflict with one Western state coinciding with alliances with others. In World War I, Germany sided with Turkey.

More recently, we have seen the West encouraging the rise of Islamic conservatism for cold war reasons — first against Nasser, in the 1960s, then against the Soviet presence in Afghanistan, in the 1980s. Conflict has been more between states of similar cultural orientation: look at China and Japan, Germany and France, Iran and Iraq.

There is, moreover, a misleading use of history in Huntington's argument. He seems to assume that cultures, civilisations or whatever are given, are like blobs on the map. But they are not. They are defined and redefined by each generation, in response to current concerns; they are defined by some people at the expense of others.

Look at all the talk of 'Asian values' in the Far East. The sort of things being invoked — high savings ratios, family values, deference to government — are contemporary phenomena articulated to meet current needs of those in power. But as Chris Patten, the governor of Hong Kong, recently put it, their main use is for one group of people to tell another group to shut up.

In the Islamic world we see that those in power resort to religion to justify their hold on power, or, when people are out of power, to justify their claim to it. Culture is flexible and instrumental. We should look at the structures of power and wealth in states, societies and families, and see in whose interests all this invocation of culture and tradition is. It does not take long to figure out what is happening.

What is your response to Huntington's suggestion that, at the present time, Islamic civilisation is far more likely to turn against the enemy within than is the case of other civilisations?

Where Huntington is more justified is in saying that, in the Islamic world, the main target of fundamentalists is internal. We see this in Iran, for example: Khomeini's 'cultural revolution', like Mao's in China, was supposedly directed against foreign influence but was in fact mainly directed against literary and ideological currents within Iran that he did not like. The best way to silence internal critics is always to brand them as agents of a foreign power.

But I think Huntington is wrong to draw his conclusions from this fact. First, all these neo-traditionalist movements are directed against internal foes — this is true of Hindu revivalism in India, of the religious right in Israel, and of the 80 million Christian fundamentalists in the US. Secondly, we must look at the political and social interests being served by this internal call to order — it is not the culture which explains what is happening.

In *Islam and the Myth of Confrontation*, you make the distinction between Islam as a theological term and a more political/sociological definition of Islam, using the latter concept in constructing your argument. But many would argue that such a division is arbitrary and cannot be justified, since, in their view, Islam is a pervasive and all-encompassing phenomenon, permeating most aspects of life in the Middle East.

The claim that Islam as a religion is identical with Islam as a political or social system is unsustainable, for two reasons. We must look at what people do, not what they say or believe they are doing.

First of all, the history of the Islamic world shows a great variety of political and social forms, as does the contemporary Islamic world. The history of the Muslim empires, from the seventh century onwards, is of the consolidation of states, along tribal, factional and ethnic lines, using religion to justify the legitimacy of these states, to enjoin submission and to exclude others.

You can, of course, write a purely religious history of the Muslim world from the *hijra* onwards, but you can also write a secular one: the Abbasid revolution, or the rise and fall of the Fatimids, need not be explained in religious terms; indeed, it is hard to do so, except in very general terms of purity and corruption.

In the contemporary world, the same applies. If Islam explained political and social behaviour you would have a unity of political and social life, which you most certainly do not. The great richness of the Muslim world is its variety.

Secondly, the politics and society of the Muslim world are, once you look at them comparatively, the same as elsewhere. Specific forms of solidarity, and specific cultural forms, exist as they do everywhere; but you have dictatorships and democracies, industrialisation and agrarian crisis, families changing in response to the modern world, inter-ethnic conflict, ethnic and nationalist revolt and so on.

People live, love, hate, make money, die as they do everywhere.

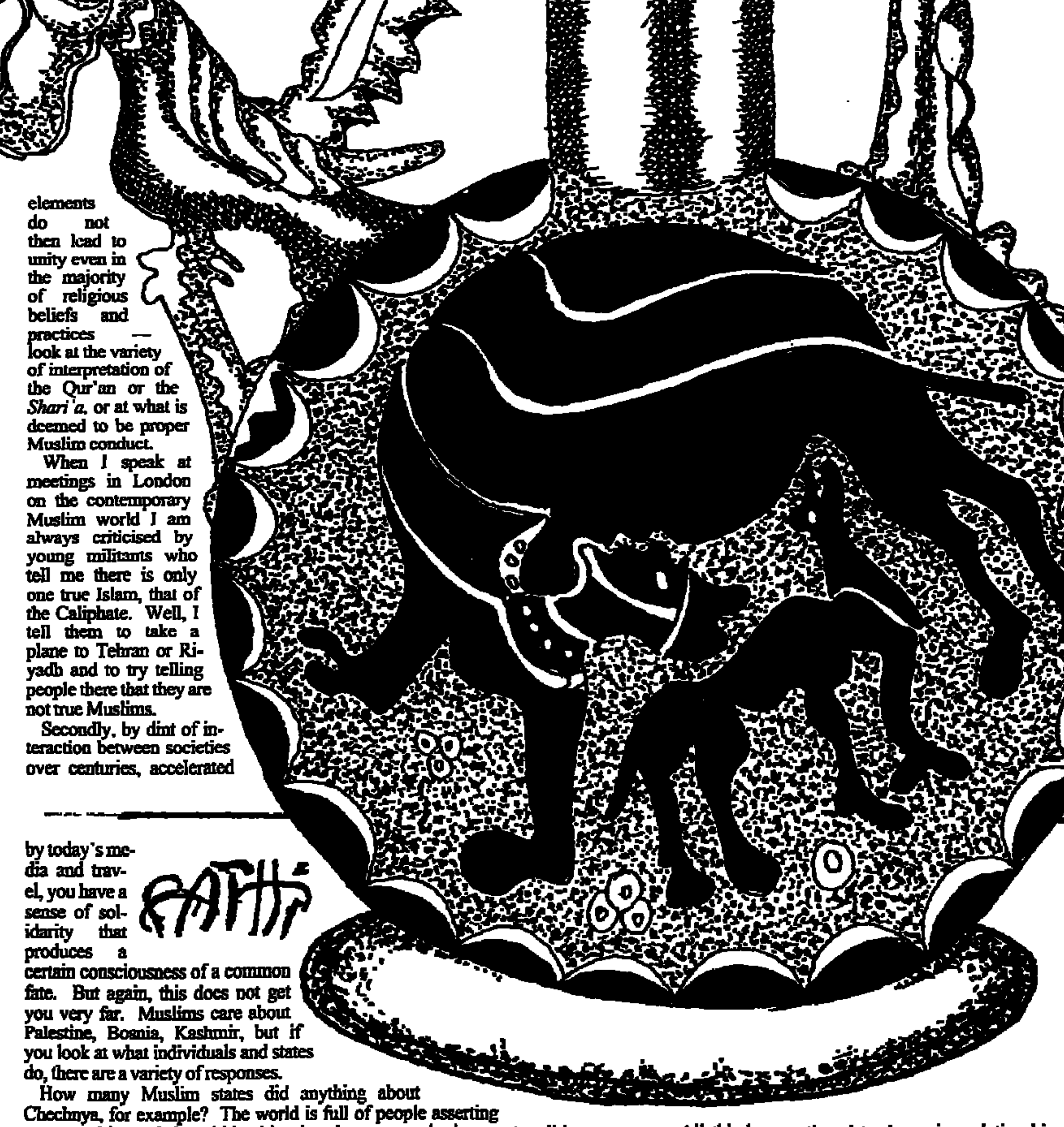
In the same book, you argue that, in a social and political analysis of Islam, Islam as an object must first be 'dissolved' in order to be made concrete in the study of particular events, times and places. Can no generalisations ever be made?

Generalisations of two kinds can be made. First of all, on the core issues of religious belief, there is a common element, in Islam as in other religions. But these core elements do not then lead to unity even in the majority of religious beliefs and practices — look at the variety of interpretation of the Qur'an or the *Shari'a*, or at what is deemed to be proper Muslim conduct.

When I speak at meetings in London on the contemporary Muslim world I am always criticised by young militants who tell me there is only one true Islam, that of the Caliphate. Well, I tell them to take a plane to Tehran or Riyadh and to try telling people there that they are not true Muslims.

Secondly, by dint of interaction between societies over centuries, accelerated by today's media and travel, you have a sense of solidarity that produces a certain consciousness of a common fate. But again, this does not get you very far. Muslims care about Palestine, Bosnia, Kashmir, but if you look at what individuals and states do, there are a variety of responses.

How many Muslim states did anything about Chechnya, for example? The world is full of people asserting commonalities and shared identities, but these are aspirations, not realities. The same goes for those opposed to the Muslim world: they trade in generalisations, most of which are false. The problem with these generalisations is that, once they are articulated and broadcast, they acquire a life of their own.



Tarek El-Bishri is deputy head of the State Council. One of the Arab world's most prominent Islamists, as a judge he has made significant contributions to the development of a contextual approach to the interpretation of Islamic law. He has also been one of the most persistent advocates of dialogue between diverse intellectual and political currents. His works on modern Egyptian history include The Political Movement in Egypt 1945-1952, Muslims and Copts within the Framework of National Unity *and* A Methodology for the Study of Contemporary Political Systems in the Islamic Countries.

Is there a conflict between Islam and the West?

When we speak of a conflict between Islam and the West, we are not referring to an objective reality, divorced from our perceptions. In this sense, in the sense of how we perceive reality, there *is* a conflict of cultures between Islam and the West. This has been due in no small part to the fact that the West consistently formulates its policies towards the Islamic countries on the premise of cultural conflict between the West and Islam.

You find, for instance, that despite the economic and political motivations which were the real reason for the Crusades, the West depicted these wars as doctrinal, religious wars. The Muslims called the [Western] invaders *Al-Firinja* (the foreigners), but the Crusaders called the peoples they invaded the Muslims. When things are formulated in this manner, perceptions of the other party begin to take on the role of objective realities and come to determine relationships.

You find this continuing into modern times, with concepts like the "white man's burden" adopted by Western statesmen and politicians, which assumes a burden of enlightenment, whether by persuasion or coercion. Once such ideas as enlightenment and its connotations are invoked, we enter into the domain of intellectual and doctrinal perceptions.

All this has continued to determine relationships, in the case of Islam and the West specifically, in the direction of cultural conflict. So when we read Huntington's thesis on the clash of cultures, we cannot consider that a formulation different from what we have experienced before will be arrived at.

Regardless of the economic and political factors which may be the real causes of conflict, the conflict becomes cultural, civilisational, once doctrinal or cultural superiority is invoked. Culture therefore becomes a dominant force in determining relationships, as was the case between the West and Islam.

So you believe that there are causes for conflict rooted in actual fact as well as perceptions?

I believe that the West does not accept any model of development or progress, even if adopted by others, unless it follows the bases and models of Western culture. We have dealt with the West for 200 years, and have often found Westerners empathising with our nationalist causes and aspirations for economic progress. But this sympathy for the most part was conditional upon those aims and aspirations following the path set by the West, applying a formula which emanated from the West's cultural as well as developmental model.

If these ambitions emanate from an Islamic framework, which reflects an intellectual formation alien to Western culture, we find that only a very few Western thinkers will be sympathetic or understanding.

You have mentioned the importance of an Islamic frame of reference in interpreting history and in developing legal and political institutions. Would such a frame of reference increase the intellectual gap between Islamic and Western thinkers?

It depends on what one's aim is. Do we wish to progress or advance, to attain economic well-being, individual and collective self-respect? Or are we concerned with being understood by the Western mind? My aim is the former, and these aspirations are really universal aims. But every nation has its particular culture, derived from its historical experience and from specific frames of reference.

Peoples and nations should be able to attain progress through their own cultural formations and experiences. I question the ability of a people to attain general human aims without basing their endeavour on their historical experience and cultural roots.

You have defined Islam as a concept and a frame of reference for political and cultural development. How would you respond to professor Halliday, who asserts: "The claim that Islam as a religion is identifiable with Islam as a political or social system is unsustainable"?

I agree with professor Halliday when he says that Islam as a concept has embraced a variety of historical experiences, social patterns and customs, and diverse applications in government and politics. But this is no different than Western culture's acceptance of a diversity of principles and manifestations, for instance fascism and democracy, communism or capitalism — all political and economic expressions derived from the Western secular frame of reference.

This diversity, which is inherent in all human interactions, took on a distinctive character in Islamic culture, due to the fact that this culture developed in a different historical context. Islam had its own concepts and a different frame of reference from which institutions and laws emanated. These in turn affected human interaction and development.

One must not underestimate the significance of this phenomenon. Modes of self expression and development compatible, rather than conflicting, with one's historical experience determine one's position in this world. I do not believe peoples or cultures can attain economic or political progress divorced from this context.

How would you define this Islamic frame of reference?

It is one which relates man to his doctrine, Islam, and to his historical context. As opposed to a secular frame of reference derived from the West's historical experience, the Islamic frame of reference has the advantage of creating harmony between the individual's philosophical position, his world-view, and his practical relationships within society and the body politic.

Does "Islam" in this sense constitute a threat to Western culture?

I think not. You can in fact say that it is the West which constitutes a threat to Islam. Islamic culture's experience over the past 200 years was of the West as aggressor, and itself as a defendant. In this sense, there is nothing to substantiate the claim that Islam threatens Western culture. Materially or culturally, I believe that the opposite is true. But Islam does constitute a very powerful line of defence against aggression. It is a very significant mobilising point for peoples; it provides intellectual immunity, so to speak.

Professor Halliday has mentioned the poor economic progress of Islamic countries, which most definitely makes them a minimal threat, if they are a threat at all. But the point of contention here is not economic strength because, when we speak of a conflict between Islam and the West, we are not talking about a conflict over resources. We are not competing with the West to attain specific material objectives; rather, the Islamic world is in a state of self-defence against what it perceives to be a threat. And here culture — cultural strength and integrity — can play a role. So this is really a conflict of cultures and civilisation, where Muslims perceive their identity to be the main point of contention.

In this context, and given the fact that you are one of the most prominent Islamists advocating dialogue between different intellectual currents, how do you see the future of dialogue with the West?

I still see the necessity for dialogue, within the Arab and Islamic world and between the Islamic world and other cultures. Dialogue, not conflict, should be perpetuated, despite everything.

With the information revolution and the great advances in science, I believe there will be more venues for interaction. I believe that there is the readiness, the ability in the Islamic world to conduct a dialogue with Western thinkers, but I doubt that most Western thinkers would be ready to admit that others can stand with them on equal intellectual footing.

We have adopted and will go on adopting elements from Western civilisation, but this is still one-way communication. The West still sees one as advanced to the extent that one conforms to it, and backward to the extent that one is divorced from it.

You have spoken of an 'Islamic' approach to history, as opposed to 'secular' interpretations. In this context, how would you respond to professor Halliday's statement that history has often been used as "a source, not of explanation, as it should be, but of legitimation"?

The Islamic approach to history here does not mean a new criterion for judging the objectivity of facts at hand. When we carry out historical research, and set up criteria to evaluate events, we should simply keep in mind the weight and influence of Islam, as a concept and a culture, in shaping historical events.

When we speak of intellectual currents and political forces in our region, things should be dealt with in a manner proportionate to their significance and the role they have played. In this sense, I speak of a history which takes into account the importance of Islam in shaping politics and society.



Ready for integration

ATTENDING the annual meeting of the World Economic Forum for the first time, President Hosni Mubarak addressed the plenary sessions last Sunday and held numerous bilateral discussions with world leaders during his four-day stay in Davos.

In his address, Mubarak told the international business community that Egypt is ready for integration into the global economy. He reviewed the reforms and progress achieved by the Egyptian economy to make itself more investor-friendly.

Mubarak attended a working dinner on the Middle East and Africa, which was also attended by Palestinian President Yasser Arafat and Israeli Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu. A meeting to bring together the three leaders did not materialise, but Mubarak discussed ways of moving the peace process forward with both leaders separately.

At a press conference that followed the two meetings, Mubarak stated that Arafat was "very pessimistic" because some "difficult points" remain unresolved, even after the Israeli withdrawal from Hebron.

Commenting on his talks with Netanyahu, the second face-to-face encounter between the two since Netanyahu came to power last June, Mubarak said that he had only limited talks with Netanyahu because of other commitments. During their discussions, which included the issues of the settlements and the resumption of the Syrian-Lebanese negotiations, Mubarak said that his message to the Israeli prime minister was: "The implementation of the Hebron agreement in good faith [will] make the Syrians and Lebanese start thinking about continuing the negotiations."

Mubarak also received a number of other dignitaries, including UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan, EU President Jacques Santer, Indian Prime Minister Deve Gowda, World Bank President John Wolfenson, IMF Vice-President Stanley Fisher, Governor of the Central Bank of Israel Jacob Frankel and World Economic Forum Founder Klaus Schwab (opposite).

(photo: AFP)

Hidden hand in Davos

Global problems were brainstormed in Davos and a hidden hand directed networking and contact-making, writes **Gamil Ibrahim** *from Geneva*

Political and economic bigwigs got together for a weekend to take stock of the state of the world economy. A wide range of global problems were brainstormed at the Swiss alpine resort of Davos. Social, political, environmental as well as economic topics were discussed. But sweeteners, in the shape of pious references to the poor and needy, failed to mask the cold realities of a world ruled by tough and ruthless businessmen. It was clear that the heads of giant multinational corporations were calling the shots, not the politicians. The chief executive officers or "CEOs" were obviously in charge and made no pretense of the fact that they considered the world their stage.

Is the World Economic Forum (WEF) itself a hidden hand that controls our world from behind the scenes? No, for the WEF is not a homogenous body. Businessmen and politicians of many different nationalities, and very often conflicting interests and agendas, presage many battles to come. Davos was as much about bargaining as about competing for spheres of influence and the dreams of reaping bigger profits.

The list of multinational corporation heads was long and inpressive. Heads of giant Japanese, Korean, European and American firms were in Davos. Leading CEOs discussed issues that related to globalisation and social cohesion, economic growth and competitiveness. Among them were Michael Bon of France Telecom; Kosaku Inaba the CEO and chairman of Ishikawajima-Harima Heavy Industries of Japan; Kenneth Lay, chairman of the Board of Management of Daimler-Benz, Germany; John Smith, president of General Motors Corporation, USA; Peter Sutherland, chairman and managing director of Sachs International, USA; and Kim Woo-Choong, chairman of Daewoo Corporation, Korea.

Today, the annual meeting has grown into the most significant global business summit and is co-chaired this year by John Bryan, chairman and CEO of Sara Lee Corporation, USA; Michael Dertouzos, professor at the Massachussetts Institute of Technology (MIT), USA; Minoru Murofushi, chairman, president and CEO of Itochu Corporation, Japan; and Heinrich von Pierer, president and CEO of Siemens AG Germany.

Behind every business deal and every speech delivered was the hidden hand of the rapid globalisation process. The economic gurus of the WEF attempted to chart the economic map of the 21st century within the context of globalisation. The key words were "networking" and "contact making". Under the banner, "Building the network society" Professor Klaus Schwab, the founder of the WEF, warned against the rise of nationalism as a result of the pressures imposed by rapid globalisation.

The bigwigs realised that globalisation and the incredible pace of change is producing a sense of insecurity and detachment for the individual. Pertinent questions were put to the different panels. What do we identify with and where do we find meaning in this fast changing world? Is globalisation part of the explanation of the rise in religious fundamentalism throughout the world? What is the role of traditional structures in giving individuals a sense of belonging and purpose?

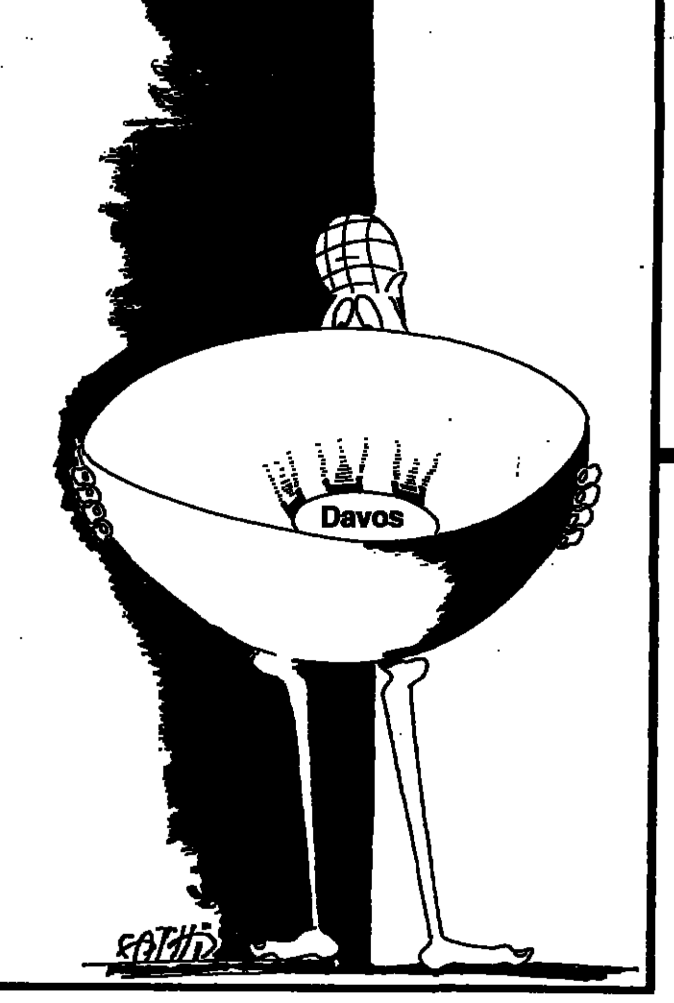
The economic and political bigwigs agreed that the process of globalisation presents both challenges and opportunities. How are today's business leaders responding? What are the appropriate organisational structures that would manage the rapid globalisation process? Can the pressures of globalisation be channeled into greater creativity within the firm? What are the secrets propelling the pace of the globalisation process forward?

In his address President Hosni Mubarak said, "The principles of globalisation govern our planet. Common principles of financial balance, fiscal soundness, monetary restraint, flexible markets, exchange stability and full employment. Principles that are constraints on all of us imposed by global flows. Globalisation also means common tenets of democracy, freedom, and respect for the fundamental right. we all have, to share in the decisions that affect our lives."

The problems of the globalisation process are legion, but we do live in an ever shrinking world, one in which the information revolution reigns supreme. It was in this context that the concept of marketing Egypt abroad was tackled. Egypt hosted the Middle East and North Africa economic conference last November. Mubarak's very presence in Davos, the first ever for an Egyptian head of state, was telling. The message was clear: Egypt meant business.

Market alert

The free market may well have no major ideological rival for the moment, but at Davos participants were reminded that its biggest threat comes from within, writes **Faiza Rady**



On the heels of the World Trade Organisation (WTO) meeting held in Singapore last December, the theme of economic globalisation continued to feature prominently on the agenda of the World Economic Forum in Davos, Switzerland. Gathering an estimated 2,000 heads of state, government officials, bankers, businessmen, scientists and academics, the forum vigorously promoted the virtues of neo-liberalism as a multitude of heads of state took to the podium, pledging their unswerving and long-term commitment to market reforms.

Setting the tone at the opening plenary last Thursday, Russian Prime Minister Viktor Chernomyrdin reiterated his government's unequivocal allegiance to reforms, while urging attending transnational corporate executives to pump capital into Russia's ailing economy. Referring to his government's short-term foreign investment goals, Chernomyrdin said that he hoped to secure $20 billion within the next three years — mainly by establishing a network of vast trade free-zones around the Pacific Rim. "Russia is clearly on the path of economic reform. President Boris Yeltsin has a clear programme of action and is going to implement it unswervingly," assured the prime minister.

Following the Russian lead, Mexican Finance Minister Guillermo Ortiz eloquently defended the soundness of the market economy, describing Mexico's recovery after the disastrous December '94 stock market crash, which left the country in shambles. "The Mexican economy could grow by more than four per cent this year, if investment remains strong and consumption recovers more quickly," explained Ortiz, adding that foreign investment totaled $8 billion last year and inflation should fall to 15 per cent this year from 27 per cent in 1996.

Like their Russian and Mexican counterparts, Indonesian ministers gloated over their high achievements — speaking of soaring investments and maintaining "dynamic" political stability and prudent economic management — while riots over growing social and economic disparities raged back home. Ethnic Chinese, who make up less than four per cent of Indonesia's population, control over 80 per cent of the country's wealth, according to financial analysts. Dismissing the raging street scenes, Sastrosoenarto Hartato, coordinating minister for production and distribution, praised the country's free market success story, saying that the investment tally for 1995 alone totaled 80 projects valued at $29.9 billion. "Investments in Indonesia, instead of dropping off, are soaring from year to year," boasted Hartato, predicting that economic growth would reach 7.8 per cent this year.

UN secretary general, Kofi Annan of Ghana, struck a more somber note among the chorus of glowing reports by denouncing the widening gap between rich and poor nations and between the haves and have-nots within these countries. "Lasting peace involves more than the intervention of blue helmets (UN troops). We cannot be secure amidst starvation," the former diplomat told the forum, explaining that the great ideological battles of the past had been resolved, with market capitalism winning the day. However, the challenge for the corporate sector was to show that it could live up to its promises. "Market capitalism has no major ideological rival. Its biggest threat is from within itself. If it cannot promote both prosperity and justice, it will not have succeeded," said Annan.

Representing the American Federation of Labour-Congress of Industrial Organisations (AFL-CIO), the most powerful US trade union claiming a membership of 13 million, union leader John Sweeney warned the forum that the by-products of the market economy — increasing unemployment and worsening working conditions — would trigger a violent backlash from labour, as already evidenced by the French and South Korean demonstrations. In reference to the constant pursuit of productivity at the expense of job security, health and welfare benefits, Sweeney said that the American model — as exported and globalised — was regarded by labour worldwide as too costly in human terms, as well as "toxic". "I am here to warn you," Sweeney told the assembled politicians and corporate magnates, "around the world the attempt to compete by going back on guarantees is meeting a growing resistance."

Back in the US many leading economists agree with Sweeney's analysis. While "downsizing" production costs by laying off workers and cutting benefits has become the norm in the corporate establishment, productivity has not significantly increased as a result. According to a 1996 study by Mercer Management Consulting Incorporated, only 27 per cent of the companies which had "downsized" between 1985 and 1990 increased their profits, while 73 per cent showed balance of payment deficits or negative growth rates. The study concluded that the deteriorating mental and physical condition of discouraged, insecure and tired workers negatively affected their productivity. Similar symptoms recur elsewhere. After British Gas was privatised and laid off 25,000 workers, the company no longer has sufficient manpower to establish a long-term strategy, reported the *New York Times*.

The US media heralded the end of the recession n 1991 with profuse reports on the economic recovery. Yet after six years of this so-called recovery, full-time unemployment rates have *not* fallen. In 1993, the change in fact occurred in part-time and temporary jobs that were filled by 22 per cent of the labour force, or 24.5 million workers. Manpower, the largest "temp" labour recruitment agency with more than 800,000 workers on its books, is currently the biggest private employer. A lot of ink has been spilled over improved labour output due to the lauded "flexibility" of temporary workers. "More flexible and more transient, these workers cost in fact much less," wrote political analyst Serge Halimi. As a result of continued corporate "downsizing" and induced labour "flexibility", US wages have become competitive again, reported *The Wall Street Journal*, labelling the wage losses as a "welcome development of transcendent importance" for big business and the ruling elite.

Large-scale wage losses have resulted in widening class disparities in America. Economist Ruddier Dornbush found that the richest one per cent increased their capita income by 70 per cent over the last 15 years and hold 48 per cent of the country's total assets, while the poorest 80 per cent own only 6 per cent. In the sprawling US ghettos, 14 million children go hungry, reported political analyst Noam Chomsky.

Globalising this model has recently triggered the most militant labour protests in South Korea's history. And more is to come should labour conditions continue to deteriorate. As Kofi Annan warned the forum in Davos "if the private sector does not deliver economic growth and economic opportunity — equitably and sustainably — around the world, then peace will remain fragile and social justice a distant dream."

Edited by **Gamal Nkrumah**

Back with a vengeance

A former Soviet prisoner returns to Russia as Israeli minister of trade and promises to cut a new deal, reports **Abdel-Malik Khalil** from Moscow

This week, Natan Sharansky, the Israeli minister of trade, visited Russia. Only 11 years ago, Sharansky was a Soviet dissident languishing in a Siberian jail. In March 1977, the Soviet authorities accused Sharansky of being an American spy and promptly imprisoned him. Nine years later, after suffering the trials, tribulations and indignities of Siberian labour camps, Sharansky was released by the Soviet authorities as part of an East-West exchange programme. He still reminisces about his ordeal and the most luxurious manner in which he left Russia. "I and four guards had a 100-seat airliner at our disposal. Frankly, never since have I travelled in such comfortable conditions," Sharansky mused.

Instead of embarking on serious trade talks with his Russian counterparts, Sharansky ignored his official itinerary and visited the grave of his friend and fellow labour camp prisoner, Andrei Sakharov. After a quick tour of Moscow's notorious Lefortovo Prison, which he considers his alma mater, Sharansky attempted to stop over at one of the labour camps in which he was incarcerated. His Russian hosts politely turned down his request.

The Russian Foreign Ministry declined to comment on the reasons why they did not permit Sharansky to visit his former labour camp. "They are embarrassed," Sharansky shrugged. He also hinted that it was a sign that Russia still cannot come to terms with its past. "Strange as it may be," Sharansky confessed, "I have no painful memories of the past. These memories bring me back to my youth."

That might well be so, but Sharansky was in Moscow on important business. Economically speaking, his visit was an attempt to achieve a breakthrough in Israeli-Russian commercial relations. Sharansky feels that trade with Russia is a major priority on his agenda. He was accompanied by the largest Israeli trade delegation ever to visit Russia. Over 70 Israeli industrialists accompanied Sharansky, and, in an unprecedented move, Israel initiated a system of state insurance to offset the economic risks taken by Israeli businessmen who trade with Russia.

Another important aspect of Sharansky's Russian visit is Russian-Israeli cooperation in the sensitive field of military cooperation. "I will not reveal a big secret if I say that there are contacts and even talks on various projects connected with the upgrade of Russian weapons to Western standards and the participation of Israeli firms in such projects," Sharansky said. It has been reported that a number of Asian countries have sent their Russian-made MIG fighter jets to Israel for repair. There is also the possibility of the Israelis selling to the Russians highly-sophisticated and specialised weapons. Sharansky, however, confessed that there still is a great deal of mutual mistrust.

Sharansky is the founder of the Israel Resurgent Party aimed at strengthening economic and cultural ties between Russia and Israel. Sharansky's party wants to make greater use of the potential of the 750,000 Israeli citizens whose native language is Russian. The Israelis of Russian descent are becoming increasingly important in domestic Israeli politics and few other countries enjoy closer cultural links with Russia. Sharansky stressed that Israel and Russia must raise the level of their economic and political ties.

"I remember how in 1984 KGB officials visiting me in prison laughed at my prediction of the collapse of the Soviet Union. The virus of freedom that Andrei Sakharov and other human rights activists preserved in conditions of almost prison-camp reality spread and contaminated the minds of millions of people. Seventy years of attempts to create a new man, a man without religion or nationality or property has failed," Sharansky said triumphantly in Moscow.

What about the rights of the Palestinian people and their inalienable right to national self-determination? Sharansky noted that Russia must play a greater role in the Middle East peace process. "I repeatedly have expressed willingness to grant any rights to the Palestinian people except for one right — the right to be capable of destroying me," said Sharansky. His Russian hosts were not amused. Russia still maintains close links with the Arab world and post-Communist Moscow still warms up to the Palestinian cause.

Ebonics mania

Why teach English as a second language to African Americans, asks **David Du Bois**

Mounting protest, supported by Clinton administration *officialdom*, has greeted the unanimous decision of the Oakland, California School Board to seek funds for the teaching of English as a second language to African American children. It is alleged that they speak something called "black English". This decision is certain to fuel already high racial tensions in the state, coming as it is in the face of California's legal battle over the recently approved State Proposition 209.

This proposition would end affirmative action efforts to compensate for discrimination and segregation against minorities and women and is believed by the Clinton administration to be in breach of the US constitution. Some $130 million is currently being spent on bilingual education to meet the needs of the children of California's large, mainly Spanish-speaking immigrant population. This, much to the annoyance of conservative, anti-immigrant supporters of Proposition 209, in California and around the nation.

"Elevating 'black English' to the status of a language is not the way to raise standards of achievement in our schools and for our students," declared President Clinton's Education Secretary Richard Riley, in a statement issued on 24 December. He ruled out the use of bilingual education federal funds for the proposed "black English" programmes. California Governor Pete Wilson also declared he would fight any attempt by the Oakland Unified School District to get state funding for its programme.

Critics of the decision have charged that the advocates of the introduction of "black English" into the school system want access to the badly needed federal and state funds available for bilingual education. However, the forthright statements of Secretary Riley and Governor Wilson seem to rule out that possibility. Consequently, these critics believe, the *effort will be stillborn.*

"Black English", sometimes called "Ebonics" for a combination of ebony and phonics, was made popular by black rap music artists in recent years. Advocates for its acceptance have for some years argued that the deeply accented and non-traditional vernacular spoken in the largely black urban ghettos of America is not merely a dialect but a language, rooted in a distinct African American culture. The Oakland School Board maintains that those students who use this manner of speech should be given special assistance to learn standard English in much the same way as a student whose native language is Spanish does.

As critics over the years have argued, "'Ebonics' is a nonstandard form of English and not a foreign language," in the words of the statement released by Education Secretary Riley on Christmas Eve. Attaching a West African origin to some limited number of expressions commonly used in the black ghetto communities as a justification for the existence of "black English" is ludicrous in the extreme, say critics. In the days of slavery, learning to read and write was a severely punished violation of the Slave Codes. At the same time, slaves were forbidden to speak their native tongues. Inevitably, under these conditions, the slaves' self-taught, spoken English was full of a great variety of linguistic "Africanisms", a few of which have survived. But, to suggest today that this validates the existence of a language distinct from English, cannot be supported, according to critics.

In recent years, Oakland ran a trial programme involving about 100 teachers who used classroom exercises to help children make the transition from "black English" to standard English. It is believed that the results of this trial programme encouraged the Oakland School Board to make its current decision. However, critics point out that school boards and educators in America historically have been educating children raised in immigrant, non-English-speaking homes. These children invariably brought into the schoolroom peculiarities of speech of a great variety — *Italian, Yiddish, Irish, Scandinavian, Russian, among others.* At no point was any one of these linguistic hybrids designated as a language distinct from English in order to facilitate the students' transition to standard English.

Some 53 per cent of the Oakland School District's 52,000 students are black. From 25 to 30 per cent are Hispanic and Asian. The Oakland district, like similarly ethnically constituted, urban school districts around the country, has suffered long-term neglect, inadequate funds, under-paid and under-trained teachers and administrators, sub-standard physical facilities and insufficient and outdated equipment.

The current trend toward privatisation of education at all levels, initiated by the Ronald Reagan administration, encouraged by the George Bush administration and today being pushed by the Republican Party-dominated Congress, has put advocates of quality public education for all on the defensive. The Oakland School Board decision is an act of desperation in the face of the threat of extinction.



NAWAZ SHARIF and his Pakistan Muslim League (PML) emerged as the undoubted winner in the Pakistani elections that took place on Monday. Monday's poll was marked by a record low turnout of less than 30 per cent of the nearly 60 million electorate. "Public respect for parties has plummeted," warned former Australian Prime Minister Malcolm Fraser, who led an election observer team to Pakistan. Independent election observers reported no serious irregularities.
Former Premier Benazir Bhutto was charged with corruption and incompetence and was dismissed from office by Pakistani President Farooq Leghari on 5 November. However, Bhutto was allowed to run against Sharif, whose own first term as prime minister was cut short in 1993 amid charges of dishonesty. Some Pakistanis, most notably Bhutto's Pakistan People's Party (PPP) supporters, feel that Leghari has overstepped his constitutional powers
(photo: Reuters)

Off the moral high ground?

The United States has the knack of getting it wrong when it tries to be what it is not, writes **Gamal Nkrumah**

Amid much tut-tutting in the developing countries over the United States' pretension to have developed cultural values and democratic principles of universal validity, the US State Department released its annual, and always controversial, human rights report las10"<ek. It did *not go down well with either America's friends* or its foes. Both vigorously protested the report.

American allies, like Turkey and South Korea, were as vociferous in their denunciation of the report as the traditional US enemies — the so-called "rogue states" of Cuba, Iran, Iraq, Libya, North Korea and Sudan. Then there was the reaction of the populous countries with a high economic potential, like China, Indonesia and Nigeria — none of whose human rights record particularly pleases the US. By and large, these countries shrugged off the report, knowing all too well that Washington would never sacrifice *their profitable bilateral economic relations* for the sake of their human rights violations.

Picture American diplomats all over the world stating that the report was a serious attempt at overcoming old biases and hatreds. It should be remembered, however, that America's own hu*man rights record is far from perfect.* America stands accused on two counts. One is that it is a racist power, with a racist establishment at home and a racist foreign policy agenda abroad. The other accusation is that it is anti-poor and pro-rich, both at home and abroad.

The reaction of Third World human rights activists was swift, short and curt. It is not helpful for America to keep the pressure on Third World governments when its own human rights record is tainted. Colour and culture clashes are two issues that crop up every now and again to threaten to derail America's low-key constructive engagement with Third World countries in Africa, Asia, Latin America and the Middle East.

Constructive engagement, a term coined during the era of former US President Ronald Reagan, originally referred to America's dealings *with a South Africa trying to rid itself of apart*heid and racial discrimination. Many Africans cynically referred to Reagan's policy as "destructive engagement". Much patience was exercised to win over the South African authorities to America's version of political democracy, individualism and market economics. This kind of restraint is not exercised when Washington deals with Cuba, Libya or Iran.

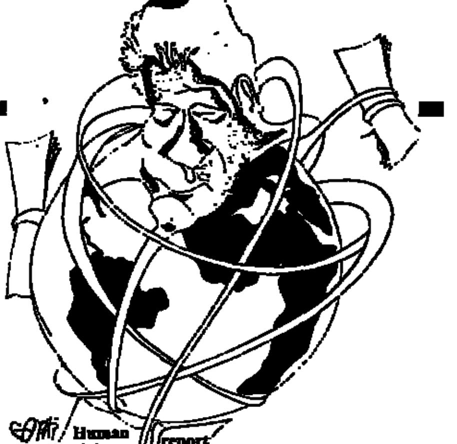
American democracy is not always commendable. Contrary to the impression given by anti-American rhetoric in the Third World, continued American engagement and, to some degree, *world leadership is expected. What is not ac*cepted is America's pretensions to moral superiority. Washington is expected to promote stability and prosperity in the young democracies of Africa and South America. America also is expected to deepen a constructive political relationship with Middle Eastern nations — the Arab world, Turkey and Iran; not just Israel. As things now stand, these countries have no real prospect of constructive American engagement.

"When human rights standards are observed, sustainable economic progress is more likely; violent conflicts are easier to prevent; terrorists and criminals find it harder to operate and societies are more fully able to benefit from the *skills and energy of their citizens," said Made*leine Albright, US secretary of state.

There is something missing. Is it not rather when poverty is eradicated; health care improved; illiteracy erased and standards of living raised that societies are better able to benefit from *the skills and energy of their citizens* and uphold human rights standards? Albright obviously had in mind another objective. "In such an environment [where individual human rights are respected], Americans are safer and we are more likely to find partners with whom to pursue shared economic, diplomatic and security goals. That is why human rights are and will remain a key element in our foreign policy," she explained.

America threatened to cut off aid to South Africa last month because of Pretoria's plans to sell arms to Syria even though the State Department report confessed that the South African government "generally respects the human rights of its citizens, and the laws and newly independent judiciary provide an effective means of dealing with instances of individual abuses." On the other hand, the report was critical of Nigeria's human rights record. It said that the Nigerian authorities "continued routinely to harass human rights and democracy activists, labour leaders, environmentalists and journalists." Yet, many American companies are lining up to profit from Nigeria's privatisation programme.

The circumstances surrounding the release of the 20th annual report on human rights issued by the US State Department look suspicious. Take Nigeria, Africa's most populous nation and one severely criticised in the State Department report. Nigeria's proposed privatisation of its vast oil and gas sector could soon net over $40 bil*lion for the military regime of General Sani* Abacha. It also has American and European investment banks salivating with anticipation. Western investment banks are gearing up to take advantage of the agricultural and mineral-rich



Nigerian economy. The 120 million-strong nation is tipped to become the economic powerhouse of West and Central Africa by the first decade of the 21st century.

Nigeria, South Africa and possibly a post-Mobutu Zaire promise investment opportunities galore. A Canadian company won a concession from the Zairean government of Mobutu Sese Seku to develop what will be the world's largest open cast copper mine. The prospects for developing other mines in Zaire and the Great Lakes region of Africa are very promising.

Small wonder that America has emerged as the key player in achieving peace in the war-torn heart of Africa encompassing Uganda, Rwanda, Burundi and Zaire. Washington also has close alliances to the governments of Ethiopia and Eritrea while it is stepping up its pressure on Sudan.

America's foreign human rights policy concerns are coloured by its capacity "to find partners with whom to pursue shared economic, diplomatic and security goals." The battered and brutalised people of Africa are just as keen on social justice and economic rights as on individual political rights.

What about America's own human rights record? The US has ratified the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination, but William Hance, a mentally retarded African American man, was *executed in Georgia on 31 March 1996. Harold* Lamont "Wili" Otey, another African American, was executed in Nebraska on 2 September 1996. Otey had no prior criminal record. There is strong evidence of racial discrimination in the application of the death penalty in America.

The only African American juror on the Hance panel swore that she had not voted for the death penalty on account of the defendant's mental condition, but she was ignored and a unanimous verdict was announced. When she *protested*, she was called a liar.

America is no moral superpower — it is simply a political, economic and, above all, military superpower. The State Department report gives the impression that America aspires to become a moral superpower. Sadly, America has yet to live up to that ambition.

According to the latest Amnesty International figures, some 3,000 prisoners were on death row in the US in 1996. The deaths of detainees in police custody were reported all over the US. Not all the detainees were criminals — many were political activists. Members of Food Not Bombs (FNB), a San *Francisco*-based organisation, were repeatedly harassed and arrested. The treatment meted out to the FNB, whose members distribute free food and information to homeless people in the Bay area, is typical of what happens to such groups. FNB members were manhandled by police and *prison officers.* Notwithstanding an international uproar, Mumia Abu Jamal, a distinguished African American writer-activist is on death row. Amnesty International warned that the death sentence in the US is disproportionately imposed on blacks and the poor.

It would be wise for America to swallow its pride and accept that it is not infallible. It is not too late to change course, however. The American First Lady, Hillary Clinton, seems to have caught the mood of the Third World. This week, she co-chaired a gathering of world leaders and non-governmental organisations seeking to facilitate the provision of small loans to 100 million poor people around the world. The beauty of the idea of banks for the poor is that it is a bottom-up affair that originated in the South. However, because of their success, banks for the poor are in danger of being appropriated by giant multinational corporations.

Still, the affair, nicknamed the Microcredit Summit, seemed to be conceptualised through the rose-tinted lenses of the American Dream. Mohamed Yunus, who founded the Microcredit Movement 20 years ago when he lent a Bangladeshi woman $25 to start her own bamboo furniture business, compared the microcredit project with manned flights at the turn of the century. "Some find our plane unsafe, clumsy, not good enough. But soon we will be flying our Boeings and Concordes and launch*ing our booster rockets," Yunus told par*ticipants at the Washington Microcredit Summit. Perhaps, for image-improving purposes if nothing else, the State Department should take its cue from the First Lady.

The breaking of the ice in the frosty Franco-Israeli relationship is imminent. *Al-Ahram Weekly takes an analytical look at France's role in the Middle East peace process*

Why France matters

France counts, but its clout is no match for America's presence in the Middle East, writes **Diaa Rashwan**

The new "Arab policy" of French President Jacques Chirac is founded on a number of basic principles laid down in French policy documents and by officials, not least of whom is Chirac himself. If the speech of the French president at Cairo University on 8 April 1996 laid down the general outlines of these principles, then his speech before the Palestinian Legislative Council at Ramallah on 23 October 1996 gave the details of French policy on resolving the *Arab-Israeli conflict.*

According to statements made by Chirac during his tour of the Arab world, the principles of French policy in the region can be summarised as follows: the principle of dialogue; support for people's right to self-determination, freedom, independence and security; French support for the aspiration of the Arab peoples to solidarity; French support for the aspiration of the Arab world to peace and, furthermore, French support to those who oppose extremism and fanaticism.

As for the three principles that specifically guide French policy on the peace process, these were laid out by the French president before the Palestinian Legislative Council as being: the principle of land for peace; people's right to self-determination and people's right to security.

As with all foreign policy issues, Chirac's new "Arab policy" will encounter a number of difficulties and obstacles in its path. These potential obstacles will be concentrated in that part of the new policy that deals with the Arab-Israeli conflict.

The standard Israeli stance since the War of 1967 has not changed except in its details with the coming of Likud to power. It opposes European intervention in resolving the Arab-Israeli dispute. This constitutes the most important obstacle to any effective French role in the peace process. The circumstances surrounding Chirac's recent visit to Israel have only increased Israel's determination to oppose French involvement in the peace process.

This Israeli intransigence complements the American view that the Middle East is an area vital to American interests and that overseeing the peace process is a task *which* befalls the United States alone. Some consider that the US insistence that neither France nor Europe interfere in the region during Israel's "Grapes of Wrath" waned despite France's new foreign policy because the American administration was occupied with the presidential elections. Indeed, some analysts believe that it was the elections in the United States that prompted the French government to take quick measures to involve itself in the *Middle East. However, this is not* likely to be repeated given Bill Clinton's electoral victory and his known opposition to a French or European role in the peace process, especially since this role involves criticism of the Israeli position.

If the joint American-Israeli refusal to countenance a French role in the peace process constitutes the most formidable obstacle to the success of the new French "Arab policy", then some observers believe that Arab bias in favour of this policy also constitutes another hindrance in the way of its success. This view is based on the idea that a French role, or a European role for that matter, needs to be one of mediation between Israel and the Arab parties involved in the peace process. Yet, to successfully perform this role, France would need to have good relations with and enjoy the trust of both sides. Consequently, Chirac's clear bias in favour of Arab and Palestinian demands would have a negative effect on his country's ability to perform the role of mediator.

Aside from these external obstacles, French policy faces great challenges within Europe. This is clear from the divisions of the European Community over the nature of its involvement in the peace process. Britain's usual stance is to oppose any increase in French involvement in the Middle East and now a number of other European countries have also voiced a lack of enthusiasm for a greater French role. Germany, Holland and Denmark all expressed their discontent with France by opposing the appointment of a special European delegate for the Middle East. On the other hand, France was supported by the states of southern Europe, especially Italy, and the Scandinavian countries. On *the subject of this European dis*agreement, the British foreign secretary said, immediately following Chirac's latest visit to the Middle East, that it could lead to a struggle for influence in the region between Europe and the *United States* and this would be damaging to the peace process. This constitutes an open criticism of France that is, according to him, acting in her own and not Europe's interests. Disagreements of this nature surely *constitute* a significant obstacle to French aspirations of playing a greater role in the peace process.

French "Arab policy" also suffers from obstacles within France; obstacles *that*, observers *believe*, can only increase. The first of these obstacles is the severe economic and political crisis reigning in France at the present time, characterised by high unemployment and corruption scandals. This is reflected by a keenness in public opinion for a greater role in international politics as a means of side-stepping more pressing domestic problems. The second problem is the strength of the French Jewish presence, especially in politics and the media. Historically, French Jews have shown no great support of the Arab states. It is possible that they cause problems for Jacques Chirac as punishment for his backing of the Arabs and Palestinians. This possibility should certainly not be discounted given the famous precedent of the French Jewish community's "punishment" of Charles de Gaulle for his opposition to Israel's aggression in June 1967. As a result of their pressure, in addition to other factors, he had to resign from the presidency after failing to get a majority in the referendum of 1968.

Finally, present Arab conditions *also may constitute an important* hindrance to an effective French role in the peace process. President Chirac has made it clear, in a number of statements as well as in his speeches when he was in the Mid*dle East, that his idea of working* with the Arab states is based on the formation of political blocs based on shared interests and common political goals. Yet the Arab world is presently characterised by disagreement and *inconsistency* as to its shared interests. This may well constitute the biggest obstacle to the new French "Arab policy," especially since a number of Arab countries share the American and *Israeli* opposition to an *effective* French role in the peace process.

The writer is an expert at the Al-Ahram Centre for Political and Strategic Studies.

Chirac's Arab agenda

Chirac plans a new French Middle East policy, writes **Hosni Abdel-Rehim**

I believe it was Winston Churchill who said, "In politics, there are no permanent friendships. There are only permanent interests." Since his ascendancy to power as head of a right-wing majority, Jacques Chirac has fostered an active policy in the Middle East. His visit to the region was among his first journeys abroad. Chirac's Foreign Minister Hervé de Charette has undertaken *shuttle visits to the re*gion, following in the footsteps of former US secretary of state Warren Christopher, especially after the Israeli attacks on South Lebanon last winter.

The Mediterranean, North Africa and the Middle East have often been at the top of the priority list of French foreign policy concerns since the days of Napoleon Bonaparte. After World War II, France was humiliatingly expelled twice from the Middle East: the first time after the Suez War and the defeat of the French-British-Israeli tripartite alliance and the second time after the Algerian War of Independence.

The United States subsequently replaced the two *old empires' influence in the region and imposed its* authority on oil resources. Meanwhile, the Soviet Union was extending its own political influence and set up industrialisation projects in Egypt and North Africa. Israel developed its alliances after the Suez War and became the United States' main strategic *ally. However, after the 1967 War,* France under de Gaulle began to search for new alliances with Arab countries and adopted a moderate attitude toward the Palestinian question.

Moreover, with the Soviet influence diminishing in the region after the 1973 War, the US inherited *the role of guarantor of peace. Hence, America* allied itself with the majority of the countries formerly under the Soviet umbrella, with Israel still enjoying a special status in America's eyes. This situation was reinforced after the Camp David Accord, when a new Middle East was being shaped. *The US position became secure as the single most* important power in the region and Israel remained its main "partner".

With the collapse of the Soviet Union in the late 1980's, the Gulf War and the speeding up of the European unification process, France emerged as the *main rival to America in the region even as* France's relative weight in the European Union is being challenged by Germany. France has a Mediterranean coastline and historical interests in the area dating from colonial times. Germany is not a Mediterranean power and is far more interested in Eastern Europe than in the Middle East.

In Africa, former French colonies have flirted with American multi-national corporations and the US has begun to penetrate spheres of traditional French influence in Central and West Africa. This has enraged Paris, but Warren Christopher's unequivocal comment was: "There is no such thing as *traditional spheres of influence.*" The recent *failures* of French strategies in Algeria, Rwanda, Burundi and Zaire have compounded France's problems.

In the context of the post-Cold War international order, a new right-wing administration has taken over in Paris. The growing influence of the traditional and new right in France is coupled with an anti-American, nationalistic mood. It is as if the policies of the new right seek to "Americanise" France from within, in order to withstand the competition with America abroad. Since the appointment of Chirac, the antagonistic campaign against the American administration's methods to resolve problems all *over the world has intensified. This campaign is pri*marily a French "nationalistic" campaign.

The Middle East and the Gulf, except for Iraq and Iran, are under American hegemony. Since Chirac's ascendancy, France has attempted to break the Western sanctions imposed on Libya, Iraq and Iran. France has no oil. It imports most of the oil it needs from North Africa — especially Algeria — and the Gulf. Any radical political change in Algeria would be disastrous for France.

Herein lies the importance of the Middle East in French strategic calculations. France aims at creating a vital sphere of influence in the region, one that matches the German pre-eminence in Eastern Europe. But the key to the Middle East has always been resolving the Palestinian question. Paris is now trying to speed the peace process and strengthen its commercial and military links to the region. France *presents itself to Arabs* as a moderate Western nation. Compared to the American unwavering support of Israel, France does look like a pro-Arab Western power.

In the short run, France's aim is to supply civil and military aircrafts to oil-rich Arab states and to *sign contracts to search and extract oil. France wants* to secure for itself a strategic position in the region. The existence of French-American and French-Israeli frictions come into play. But whether Arabs will ultimately benefit from French attempts to curry favour with the Arabs remains an open question.

The buck stops here

Losing money was the only problem facing public sector companies set to be sold off, reports **Gamal Essam El-Din**



One of the many textile factories with stalled production

For those arguing that the fiscal problems plaguing public sector companies waiting to be sold off are the major impediments to the successful execution of the government's ambitious privatisation programme, MPs and public sector industrial experts will beg to differ. Equally troubling, argue these officials and economists, is the "social dimension" of privatisation which requires that the government find a way of coping with the thousands of redundant public sector employees.

These assertions, which came at a time when the discussions in the People's Assembly had concentrated for weeks on resolving the financial problems confronting the country's numerous loss-making public sector companies, focused the spotlight and criticism on the vestiges of the Nasser era socialist policies instituted in the late '50s and early '60s. The socialist policies, which came into force in the second half of the 1950s, stressed the importance of the social dimensions of business, often at the expense of quality and the profit motive, argued Public Sector Minister Atef Ebeid during a recent Assembly meeting.

"Due to these social dimensions, the goods produced by most public sector companies were not only sold at a loss in order to meet the needs of the members of lower income brackets, but were also not up to par in terms of quality," said Ebeid.

A case in point, noted the public sector minister, are 10 textile producing firms who sold their output at 20 per cent below cost. Over the years, he added, these companies failed to develop any sense of competitiveness, mainly due to the fact that their goods were sold by the Ministry of Supply through its numerous, large department stores.

"It is clear, in this instance, that the social dimension not only came at the expense of quality, cost-effectiveness and economic performance, but also at the expense of exporting and competing on the global marketplace," stated Ebeid.

The push towards liberalisation and privatisation, starting in the 1990s, he added, has actually compounded the problem, bringing to surface shortcomings that previously had remained ignored or undiscovered.

"The fact that these companies are massively overstaffed is another key factor obstructing the road to privatisation," argued Ebeid. "Under the new policies, these companies are now required to sell their products at market prices, at the expense of the 'social dimension', and have to lay off workers as a basic step towards reducing costs and maximising productivity."

Moreover, stated Ebeid, Egyptian companies are also plagued by a degree of stagnation, wherein neither the work ethic, managerial skills nor technology have advanced much since the 1960s. These problems, he was quick to add, should gradually become a thing of the past as the country's privatisation experiment picks up steam.

Ebeid's candid statements were echoed by Amin Mubarak, chairman of the parliament's Industrial Committee. Mubarak argued that overstaffing in public sector companies slated for sale hindered the privatisation programme since anchor investors have stipulated, as a precondition for sale, "that the government take care of the excess labour force."

Ebeid also tackled the issue of high customs tariffs as an impediment to privatisation. Again recalling the 1952 Revolution, the public sector minister explained that the goal of economic independence espoused by Nasser's government resulted in the setting of tariffs on imported goods at a prohibitively high level. And while the aim of this move was to protect fledgling Egyptian industries from competition with their more established international counterparts, "these rates quickly proved to be a matter of life and death for both public and private sector industries," he said.

Having been used to these protectionist tariffs, Ebeid noted that Egyptian companies have yet to come to fully understand free market forces. In fact, he said, "it is clear that an incurable [industrial] inferiority complex has developed over the years."

On this point, however, Mohamed Farid Khamis, chairman of the Federation of Egyptian Industries (FEI), disagreed. Egyptian industrialists, he maintained, favour high duties on imports not in deference to socialist policies leftover from the 1960s, nor from a poor understanding of liberalisation, but because "reducing customs tariffs would expose Egyptian industry to wave after wave of dumping of subsidised goods."

"This could ultimately lead to bringing about the downfall of different industrial projects in the new industrial communities," he concluded.

Further compounding the problems confronting the privatisation process, agreed most industrial experts and MPs, is the fact that Egypt's industrial sector is not sufficiently integrated. Once again targeting the socialist policies instituted by the 1952 Revolution's leaders, Ebeid noted that while the then government's plans for industrial growth were ambitious, what they have actually led to are a number of grave "historical errors". First and foremost among these mistakes was that emerging industries lacked the necessary dimension of "integration".

"While we have an integrated network of textile industries, this integration was almost absent in the chemical industries, for example," he said. Ebeid argued that many of these industries were founded without obvious need, before sufficient feasibility studies were conducted or without regard to the long term availability of resources.

"The General Battery Company is one such company that was never fully integrated," he recalled. "As its losses became too staggering, the company was closed down three years ago. Many of its employees, however, still collect their salaries each month." Needless to say, these types of companies in no way appeal to anchor investors and, sadly, account for the majority of Egypt's loss-making public sector enterprises.

Touching on this point, the FEI's chairman, Farid Khamis, stated that the government's industrial experts should work in conjunction with the private sector to forge a new map for industrial projects and investments.

"The new industries should not just be integrated as a means of building a sound national industrial base, but they should be provided with the necessary infrastructural foundations and be spread out over a wide area," said Khamis. As a precursor to these initiatives, in-depth feasibility studies must be conducted to bring together geographic, demographic, geological and socio-economic factors.

Says Khamis: "Priority for new industrial projects should be given to Upper Egypt, not Sinai."

Green and clean in Cairo

Environment '97 will usher in what is hoped to be a new era in domestic and regional environmental awareness. **Aziza Sami** reports

Representatives of international businesses, environmental protection agencies and government organisations will come together at the Environment '97 Conference due to open in Cairo on 16 February. The international conference, the first of its kind in the Middle East and North Africa, is being organised by the Egyptian Environmental Affairs Agency (EEAA), the country's highest authority in the field.

Boasting a panel of participants from 25 international and 40 Egyptian public and private companies representing the industrial, contracting, telecommunication, solar energy and petroleum sectors, Environment '97 will serve as a forum for exhibiting new environmental technology and the presentation and discussion of papers. In short, the conference, which will be held at the Cairo International Conference Centre, aims at providing participants with an opportunity to familiarise themselves with the latest developments, as well as sharing their experience in their respective fields. But perhaps more significantly, participants are to discuss also the formulation of management systems which help reduce environmental risks.

The sheer number of public and private sector business representatives expected to attend this conference reflects the growing awareness on the part of business of the need to maximise profitability and production while at the same time safeguarding the environment and minimising safety costs incurred by their operations. To this end, companies have been increasingly adopting comprehensive management systems that bring together factors such as health, the environment and safety considerations.

During the conference, a series of papers will be presented in three interactive parallel sessions, with participants in these sessions to include the United Nations' Environmental Programme (UNEP), the World Bank's Environmental Unit and some 40 universities, environmental agencies, and representatives of environmental affairs ministries in Ghana, Nigeria, Hungary, India, the UK, Germany and the US. The session will be divided into three "tracks" — an urban track, an industry track and a nature track — each of which covers various aspects of environmental management and technology.

Several consulting firms specialising in environmental protection will take part in the urban track sessions, focusing their attention and expertise on issues such as solid waste management and air and noise pollution in urban areas. In the industrial track, representatives of heavy industry companies, contractors and engineering firms will exhibit the latest technology in the areas of industrial waste-water disposal and hazardous waste management. And in the nature track, marine and petroleum service companies, as well as drilling, exploration and production companies, will exchange information on integrated coastal zone management, marine pollution and desertification. In general, the technology displayed at the trade fair portion of the conference will reflect the practical application of the three tracks. The fair will bring together vendors, manufacturers and potential customers of environmental equipment and, as such, is expected to activate a demand for related products in Middle Eastern, African and European markets. Moreover, with numerous government representatives on hand, contractors and financiers will have a chance to strike some deals on the side.

Runaway stock prices capped

Fearing that stock prices will unjustifiably go through the roof, the Exchange Committee sets a ceiling. Just how smart was this move? **Shereen Abdel-Razek** reports

The rocketing value of some shares traded over the last six months on the Egyptian stock market has left market authorities concerned that the crash experienced in the first half of 1995 will be repeated soon. At the time, the market plummeted to its lowest level ever following a sharp decline in the price of over-valued stock.

In line with the adage that an ounce of prevention is better than a pound of cure, the Exchange Committee has intervened in a bid to cap this surge in share value. The committee has decided to set a five per cent ceiling as the maximum amount by which stock prices will be allowed to increase daily.

A senior official at the CMA, who wished to remain anonymous, said that the five per cent ceiling will help restrain the surges in stock prices resulting from stock speculation.

"The 1,100 per cent surge in the share value of one housing company [the Heliopolis Housing and Development Company] over the last six months is but one of the many unnerving examples," said the source. He went on to explain that the company's share value went through the roof shortly after it published its annual report showing a high assets value. And although the company's performance is good, he said, the increases in its share value are unjustified and unrealistic. This fact, however, went unnoticed by investors who, not realising that the value of its assets would not benefit them directly unless they are liquidated, rushed to buy its stock.

While this is clearly a dangerous situation, the official did not agree with the market authorities' decision to intervene with the price ceilings. The market forces, he said, should have been allowed to follow their course, thereby allowing the market to strike the balance. Furthermore, he said, the surge in the value of some shares is only to be expected, and is a result of the privatisation process coupled with sound management strategies and sizeable posted profits. These types of increases should not be capped, stated the official.

Nonetheless, fixing a ceiling on stock fluctuation is not a new phenomenon on the market. The Capital Market's Executive Charter states that the daily shifts in the share value must be in the range of five per cent and less than 20 per cent per week. The Exchange Committee's new decision, which went into effect on 18 January, does not specify either a maximum daily decrease or weekly increase.

Ashraf Shamseddin, head of the CMA's Market Operations Department, explains that setting a ceiling acts as a circuit breaker to a feverish rush to buy the highly-priced shares. "The correct investment decision must be based on a deliberate examination of both the company's situation and the market conditions," he said.

Shamseddin added that the new decision gives investors the right to buy or sell shares at prices more than the five per cent cap, on condition that they give the exchange authority their motives for taking such an action. The Exchange Committee must be sure that the purchase or sale decision is based on information available to all players on the market.

According to Hani Tawfik, a market expert and a private consultant, setting a ceiling for the increases in share value is vital for those volatile stock markets, like that of Egypt, which lack transparency. However, he does not believe that the current surge in share prices is likely to threaten overall market stability.

"The market conditions are quite good and, as a result, is unlikely to witness a slump like that of 1995. At that time, there was a big supply of shares but the demand was about one tenth of its current volume," Tawfik explained.

Getting the goods

Local producers believe that greater effort must be exerted to promote their goods. **Zeinab Abul-Gheit** finds out how

Both international and local exhibitions or fairs are a good way to boost marketing and open up new venues for national products — provided the events are properly organised. As many businessmen agree, this is not always the case.

Mohamed Alieddin, commercial manager of Ceramica Cleopatra Company, said that neither the main body in charge of organising exhibitions — the General Organisation for International Exhibitions and Fairs (GOIEF) — nor private companies are capable of fulfilling this task.

To begin with, Alieddin said, producers are not given sufficient notice as to when GOIEF fairs will actually take place: "Sometimes we find out by chance". As a result, producers do not have enough time to make proper arrangements for shipping and display areas. Since GOIEF does not even supply exporters with a map of the display area, many of the exhibitions are poorly designed.

Although private companies which organise exhibitions have improved their services considerably, many of them remain ignorant of the needs of foreign markets, according to Alieddin. Their fairs tend to be small ones which generally cannot accommodate large companies. The rent for exhibition space in these fairs is usually very high. Another problem is that private companies are sometimes forced to cancel exhibitions for failing to get GOIEF approval on time.

Louis Bishara, owner of BTM clothing company, agrees that neither GOIEF nor private exhibition companies are capable of organising high-quality fairs. Even though there are plenty of private companies, the problem, Bishara said, is that most of them confine their activities to the local market.

Cairo should be promoted as an international fair centre to attract foreign producers to exhibit their products in Egypt, suggested Bishara. Time and expense will be saved for Egyptian producers. Meanwhile, Arab producers would be more encouraged to come to Cairo since it is close and convenient.

Mohamed Roushdi Sakr, GOIEF chairman, denied his organisation has any shortcomings. He did say, however, that GOIEF plans to increase its consultations with producers in the coming year. For the first time, Sakr said, the organisation's plans will be charted according to the needs of exporters, businessmen and investors. Meetings with exporters and businessmen will be held at least twice a year. "They will choose for themselves the countries where they want to market their goods and accordingly an exhibition will be scheduled," explained Sakr.

GOIEF is especially concerned that the goods exhibited abroad are of the best quality, according to the chairman. For this reason, a committee must review products to be displayed before approving them. And Sakr said, "In many cases certain goods are rejected."

Regarding private exhibition companies, Sakr said that most perform their job very well and GOIEF fully supports and encourages them by providing them with technical and marketing assistance.

In defence of private companies, Issa Abdel-Halim Issa, director of Issa International Trading Company, explained that some private companies lack specialists to study the needs of foreign markets so that Egyptian producers can supply them. This could be solved, according to Issa, if the Information Authority provided private companies with regular data on the needs of foreign markets.

Issa said that private companies organise small fairs because of the high cost of exhibition rentals abroad. "If the company rents a big area, only a small number of exhibitors may participate and in this case, the company would lose a lot of money." A possible solution, Issa suggested, could be that the government shares the expense of rent with the private companies. "The participation of the government, will encourage large-scale producers to participate in the exhibitions," Issa said.

NBE investment fund

THE CAPITAL Market Authority this week approved the National Bank of Egypt's (NBE) request to raise the capital of its two investment funds by LE100 million each. The capital of the first fund, with accumulative yield, will now total LE200 million, while that of the second will reach LE300 million. The NBE, which already owns five per cent of the capital of the two funds, will add to its initial investment LE5 million per fund. The increase will be covered through the sale of the fund's investment certificates to investors.

Farid Ibrahim, managing director of National Fund Management Company (NFM), which manages the two funds, said the impetus behind this move came an increasing, over the last three months, for fund certificates.

"The surge in certificate yields due to the recent revival in the stock market has energised the demand," said Ibrahim.

Moreover, NFM, which is 55 per cent owned by the NBE's Employee Fund, lowered the administrative fees on the first fund. Established in 1994, this fund was the first of its kind in Egypt.

Market report

GMI at all-time high

THE GENERAL Market Index has continued its uninterrupted surge through the week ending 30 January, gaining 16.87 points to close at a new record high of 372.18 points. The total market turnover, which witnessed substantial daily increases, reached LE477.2 million by the end of the week.

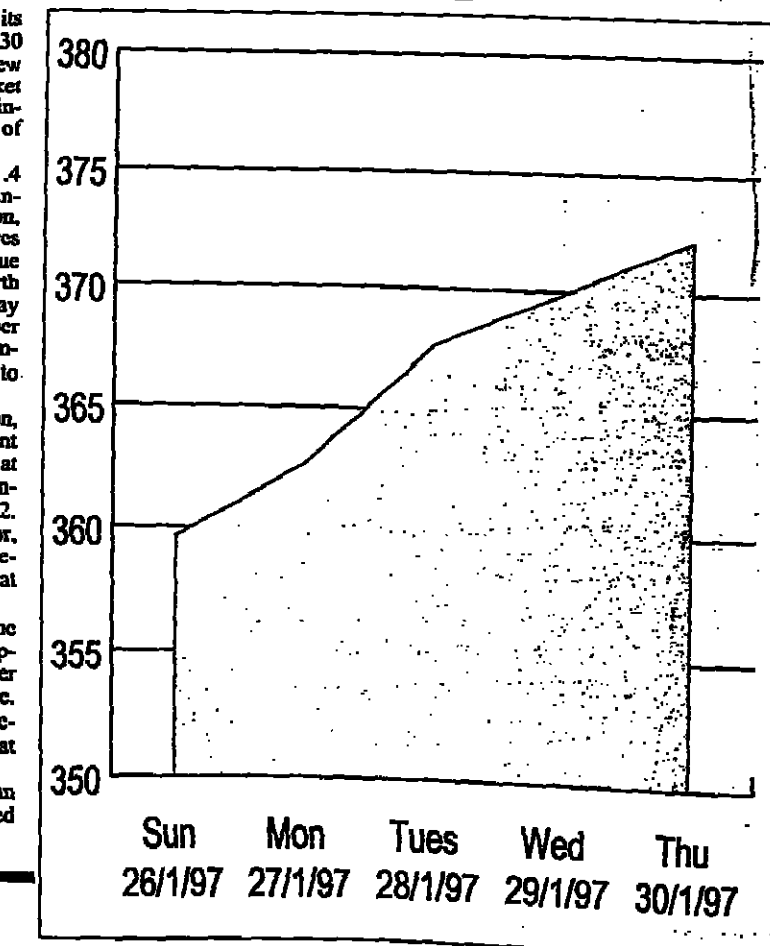
Dominating the market this week, roughly 1.4 million shares of the Paints and Chemical Industries' Company, worth LE169 million, changed hands during the week's trading. Shares of the five key milling companies also stayed true to their upward trend of past weeks, with North Cairo Mills and Bakeries' stock leading the way by gaining 21.3 per cent to close at LE170 per share. However, the Middle Egypt Mills Company's shares inched down by 1.19 per cent to level off at LE62.5.

Announcing first-term profits of LE38 million, the Silos Company shares recorded a 27 per cent increase over their opening value before closing at LE89, while those of Technopac enjoyed an impressive 220 per cent increase and closed at LE32.

On the losing side in the manufacturing sector, Cairo Poultry led the way, with its shares declining in value by 17.34 per cent and ending at LE22.4.

In the financial sector, the index rose by nine points and closed at 543.28 points as the Egyptian-Saudi Finance Bank registered a 22.19 per cent increase to level off at LE45.81 per share. Shares of the Commercial International Bank remained stable, for the third week in a row, at LE600.

In all, the shares of 68 companies recorded an increase in value, 20 decreased and 28 remained unchanged.



Edited by **Ghada Ragab**

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Al-Ahram: A *Diwan* of contemporary life

1 6 8 This week's *Diwan* episode is a love story that was crowned with marriage but ran into family difficulties and, after many ups and downs, culminated in a happy ending. The bride and bridegroom eventually lived under the same roof but only for nine years, after which the husband died. Our chronicler, **Dr Yunan Labib Rizk,** chose to trace the story in *Al-Ahram* at the beginning of this century because its developments became the subject of a turbulent court case and a heated public debate. The story is also unique in that its heroine is a young lady who breached social customs and traditions and defied her father, a prominent notable, to marry the man she loved, a journalist and publisher.



One of the most famous court cases in Egyptian history is that which took place in the summer of 1904, when Sheikh Abdel-Khaleq El-Sadat, a prominent notable, filed suit against Sheikh Ali Youssef, the owner of *Al-Mu'ayyid*. Sheikh El-Sadat sought a compulsory separation between his daughter, Safiyya, and Sheikh Youssef, who had married her against his will. Although the case is familiar to those who have studied contemporary Egyptian history, the following outlines the highlights as they emerged through the testimonies of the parties involved.

Safiyya, Sheikh El-Sadat's youngest daughter, was a well-educated young woman whose father would sometimes take her to literary salons of the sort attended by Egyptian intellectuals, including Sheikh Ali Youssef, who fell in love with her. She did not discourage him.

Ali Youssef was considerably older, in his fifties at the time. But he was the owner of a respectable newspaper and one of the most important figures of journalism of the age. Although he had relatively modest beginnings, by that time he had acquired considerable fame and wealth, which induced him to try his luck at taking a second wife. He had married his first wife when he was very young and she had given him a daughter. He proposed to Sheikh El-Sadat to marry his daughter and, although El-Sadat declared his approval in principle and accepted the dowry and marriage gifts, for four years he kept deferring setting an actual date for the wedding.

Why he continued to waver with regard to the marriage is uncertain. Perhaps he was manoeuvering to exact more money to conclude the marriage, which is what Sheikh Youssef accused him of; perhaps Youssef was not a suitable match for the daughter, as El-Sadat countered; or perhaps he was simply stalling, as his daughter suspected, in order to give her elder sisters a chance to get married first. Eventually the couple married without parental permission.

At first glance, this appears to be an ordinary case involving personal status litigation, in spite of the fame of its protagonists. However, what would lend it its historical notoriety was the intervention of parties who were more famous yet. Above all, there was the Khedive Abbas, who supported Youssef, firstly because his newspaper, *Al-Mu'ayyid*, promoted the khedive's polices, and, secondly, because Abbas, as a result of his European upbringing, would have found the notion of separating a man and his wife against their will distasteful. The nationalist leader, Mustafa Kamel, was another illustrious figure involved. Kamel put his weight fully behind El-Sadat through his newspaper, *Al-Liwa'*, which published numerous articles attacking Youssef, describing him as "the ageing teenager", for marrying someone so much younger.

What Mustafa Kamel's motives might have been to take this stance are unknown. Some have suggested that it was the result of an old antagonism between the two men after Youssef had stopped allowing Kamel to publish in *Al-Mu'ayyid*, forcing him to publish his own newspaper. Others believe that it was due to their rivalry to ingratiate themselves with Abbas, while yet a third group, among whom was the khedive himself, simply attributed Kamel's stance to his innate conservatism.

Whatever the case, the case was guaranteed to enter the annals of the Egyptian national movement after a tempestuous meeting between Abbas and Kamel in Dijon, where the khedive had been spending the summer. Mohamed Farid, who had recorded this meeting in his memoirs, writes, "Mustafa gently reproached the khedive for intervening in the case, explaining to him that his intervention would tarnish his reputation, particularly since public opinion was against Sheikh Youssef for trying to marry the girl against the wishes of her father. The khedive responded, 'Public opinion? Do we have something called public opinion? I tell you that if I put on a cap and took a walk in the streets, nobody would dare utter a word.' The khedive then lost his temper and told Mustafa, 'I don't need anybody to give me advice. I know where my duty lies!' Then he stormed out of the room."

The upshot was the notorious letter which the nationalist leader sent to the khedive following this meeting in which he wrote, "The current political situation is such that it compels me to distance myself from Your Highness and to assume, alone, responsibility for the plan which I intend to follow with regard to the British occupation, so as not to burden your noble self and so as to prevent possible differences and acrimony between us."

Of immediate note in *Al-Ahram*'s coverage of the case is its concern for keeping the issue in proportion. It was no more than an ordinary suit involving questions of personal status, a perspective we observe in its first lengthy article on the issue, when it reported the court's ruling that there was cause to give consideration to Sheikh El-Sadat's claim. The ruling read: "Whereas the marital contract was concluded in a home other than that of the father of the bride and without his consent; and whereas sufficient doubts have been cast upon the eligibility of the groom so as to call into question the durability of the bond between the couple, and whereas such doubts compound grounds for proscription: the exercise of conjugal rights of Sheikh Ali Youssef with Lady Safiyya shall be considered illegal and they should be separated; and, whereas such physical separation requires a trustworthy agency to maintain it, none other but her father can be considered capable of preventing the contact between his daughter and Sheikh Ali Youssef; the court has ruled to physically separate Sheikh Ali Youssef and Lady Safiyya and to deliver the latter into the hands of her father, said ruling to be implemented immediately." The ruling was signed "Ahmed Abu Khatwa, chief magistrate of the high religious court."

The ruling provoked an outcry in some newspapers and jubilation in others. *Al-Ahram*, however, was keen to quell the flames. After it announced that the bride had left the home of her husband in Daher, and taken up residence in the home of "the notable scholar, Sheikh Abdel-Qader El-Rafie, where she had decided to stay until the final ruling is pronounced," the newspaper urged restraint. It further expressed its hopes that the efforts of disinterested parties would yield positive results, for "all are deeply pained by a case such as this involving an old and established house such as that of El-Sadat and a major cornerstone of society such as the owner of *Al-Mu'ayyid*."

Al-Sadat was incensed at his daughter's decision to take up residence in the home of El-Rafie and was intent on having the ruling of the court implemented to the full. This was no easy process. It appeared as though the government was deliberately attempting to stall the implementation of the court order and this pleased neither the court that issued the ruling nor *Al-Ahram*.

Meanwhile, Safiyya herself submitted a letter that evidently did not influence the judges' opinion. She wrote: "In my capacity as a competent adult in full possession of her faculties and able to determine her own affairs, I have the absolute right to marry the person whom I deem suitable in every aspect. This right, which has been sanctioned by Islamic law and conferred upon every Muslim woman who has attained the age of majority and is of sound mind, cannot be denied me by anyone. Please be informed, Your Excellency, that I am content with my husband and would choose no other under any circumstances. I married him with my full and absolute consent, with the testimony of two legitimate witnesses and my acceptance of the dowry as is stipulated in the marriage contract which I had chosen to conclude in the home of the closest relative to me after my father, who has consistently rejected qualified suitors for his daughters. As I fear the consequences of my return to his home, I remain determined not to return there, whatever the result of this case may be."

Al-Ahram's reaction took up most of the first page in its 27 July 1904 edition. Beneath the headline "A ruling of separation with a suspended sentence" it voiced its objection to the refusal of the governorate's office to implement the ruling.

The *Shari'a* Court met, with Sheikh Abu Khatwa presiding, and, instead of proceeding with the case, it announced that "the court had decided to suspend the proceedings of this trial until its ruling is implemented and should that not occur, the court will be forced to suspend proceedings in all the cases before it."

The flood of reaction precipitated by this decision gave *Al-Ahram* the opportunity to declare its position: "There is only one issue that is of utmost importance to us and that is to uphold the sanctity of the provisions of law and to maintain them above the capacity of anyone to tamper with them at their own whim or fancy." It added, "We will not publish any of the letters that have come to us for fear of favouring one party at the expense of another." The only exception it made to this rule was to publish a letter that had arrived in the form of a telegram and signed "The wife of Sheikh Ali Youssef, Safiyya El-Sadat." She wrote, "If the intention of the court was to separate me from my husband to prevent the conjugal tie then this aim has been achieved through the auspices of a most trustworthy intermediary. If its intention above all is to return me to my father then I must appeal to the compassion and justice of the government to stop this insistence upon inflicting on me a situation which will force me to take drastic measures, for death is preferable to me than returning to the home of a father whose wrath will blind him to his actions."

Clearly matters had reached a dangerous impasse and an urgent solution was required. The following day, Boutros Ghali, chargé d'affairs of the Ministry of Justice, met with Sheikh Abu Khatwa and they agreed to put the ruling into effect in full and to notify El-Sadat of this decision. When Youssef learned of the decision he wrote to El-Rafie urging him to convince Safiyya to comply and to return to the home of her father. El-Rafie responded that his efforts to do so were to no avail. Events, however, took a different turn when Sheikh El-Sadat himself agreed that his daughter could remain in the home of El-Rafie on the condition that she was forbidden to see her husband. When the police force charged with implementing the court ruling appeared at El-Rafie's doorstep to notify him of this decision, he pledged to meet her father's conditions.

Now that the physical separation of the man from his wife had been effected, the court would proceed to the subsequent phase of the case in order to determine whether to annul the marriage. On 1 August 1904 the court was called into order with judge Abu Khatwa presiding.

The next session of the trial was held seven days later, in order for each side to prepare their witnesses. While for El-Sadat, finding respectable character references would be easy, this would not prove as easy for Youssef, since "character" in this case meant proving noble descent, as became clear when the court was called into session on 8 August.

The court pronounced its ruling on 11 August 1904. It read: "The court has ruled in favour of Ahmed Abdel-Khaleq El-Sadat and against Sheikh Ali Youssef, the owner of *Al-Mu'ayyid* and Safiyya, the daughter of Ahmed Abdel-Khaleq El-Sadat and thereby declares that their marriage is illegal and orders their separation."

Naturally, the ruling would provoke widespread debate, in which of course *Al-Ahram* would participate. Perhaps the most important contribution of this newspaper was the study submitted by the lawyer Alfonse Zeiniya, who made the following distinction. While, in accordance with Islamic law, the father had the right to contest the suitability of his daughter's husband, Safiyya, in accordance with civil law, was a full and competent individual whose absolute freedom in the choice of husband could not be violated, and "should her father attempt to do so, he would meet the same punishment as any other person who attempted to impinge upon her right. The author, therefore, advised Safiyya to pursue the matter in a civil court.

Although Safiyya did not follow this advice, she nevertheless refused to return to her father's home. On the one hand, the father filed suit to have his daughter forcibly returned to his house on the grounds that she was a liability to herself. On the other hand, the court's ruling had yet to be executed in accordance with the law which required the judge to meet with the man and wife together "in the home of the husband or in the home of the wife and to interpose himself between them and say, 'I have ordered your separation, do you accept to comply with that order,' and if they answer in the affirmative, he is to respond, 'then I hereby declare your marriage null and void.' But if they refuse to comply, the judge must say, 'Then I hereby divorce you and each of you shall go your own way.'"

On 4 October *Al-Ahram* announced to its readers that the case had come to an end. Safiyya had voluntarily decided to return to the home of her father "where she was welcomed amidst great jubilation, confirming our prediction that rational behaviour will resolve this issue in the end." Evidently, this turn of events was precipitated by a court order that had been delivered to El-Rafie to the effect that if the daughter did not return willingly, the court would have to implement its ruling by force. It also appears that *Al-Ahram* was unaware that the young woman's return to her father was one part of an agreement that had been concluded secretly between El-Sadat and Youssef. In accordance with the deal, El-Sadat consented to give his daughter to him in marriage on the condition that the marriage take place with his official consent and after the passage of a suitable period of time.

The marriage was indeed concluded, but this time away from the curiosity and commotion of the public eye. It was to be a happy marriage, untainted by the aftermath of the trial, but one that ended only nine years later with Sheikh Ali Youssef's death.

The author is a professor of history and head of Al-Ahram History Studies Centre.





Apple buys NEXT Software

ALI ISMAIL, sales department manager at Pack Egypt, the sole representative of Apple Computer in Egypt, said that Apple Computer plans to buy NEXT Software for $400 million. According to the purchase contract, services and research of NEXT Software will be merged with Apple Computer, in order to be able to launch technological innovations.

Ismail added that buying NEXT Software expresses Apple's concern to change the style of its activities and confirms that it adopts an open-door policy.

New companies established

THE COMPANIES' Committee of the Ministry of Economy headed by Ahmed Fouad Atta, first under-secretary of the ministry, approved the establishment of 31 companies with a capital of LE140 million.

Among the new companies are 18 joint stock companies with a total issued capital of LE138 million and licensed capital of LE693 million, in addition to 13 limited-liability companies with capitals of LE1.8 million.

The new companies operate in the areas of trade, tourism, contracting and agriculture.

NBE's lending programme for small, medium-scale industries

IN LINE with its constant endeavours to support Egypt's reform policies and encourage private enterprises to play a greater role in the economic development process, the National Bank of Egypt (NBE) has embarked upon opening wide vistas of new job opportunities. This goal is sought through the bank's lending programme for small and medium-scale enterprises and in cooperation with the Ministry of Industry and Mineral Wealth, and the Federation of Egyptian Industries.

According to its programme, priority will be given to labour-intensive projects, hi-tech industries and Upper Egypt enterprises. However, total investment costs of the project must range from LE0.5 million to LE1 million including the land and buildings.

These loans shall be allocated for financing he purchase of machinery and equipment necessary for the project as well as the raw materials required for one or more production cycles. Working capital loans shall be repaid over a two-year period including a six-month grace period. On the other hand, investment financing shall be repaid over a five-year period including a grace period of one year at the most.

The ceiling of any or both kinds of financing amounts to LE1 million, provided that it would not exceed the customer's self finance. However, this ratio could, exceptionally, amount to 70 per cent versus 30 per cent for the customer's self resources according to the feasibility study of the project. The loans are granted at a simple interest rate of 9 per cent annually payable biannually. This rate is to be reviewed after 3 years for working capital financing or the repayment period for investment financing, so as to encourage the project in its early phase. After that, the bank's basic rate shall apply.

In fact, NBE's efforts in enhancing small and medium-scale projects are spelled out by its ambitious strategy geared towards boosting the national economy through a host of traditional and innovated banking services.

Egyptian-Tunisian trade increases to $59 million

COMMERCIAL exchange between Egypt and Tunisia reached $59 million during 1996, with $31.5 million in Egyptian exports and $27.5 million in Tunisian exports. Yamani Felfela, head of the Egyptian Investment Association, explained that the volume of commercial exchange between the two countries increased by $5 million over 1995, when the trade volume reached only $54 million. This increase can be attributed to the important decisions taken by the supreme cooperative council established by the two countries, which met in the first days of last April. Among these decisions was the provision of cargo boats to carry goods from Rabat to Egypt.

The council is currently devoting its time to study the means necessary to double the trade volume. The council, headed by the prime ministers of Egypt and Tunisia, will convene again in March to discuss issues related to this matter. One of the proposed methods will be to establish a free zone between the two countries where Egyptian and Tunisian goods can be sold with gradual exemptions in duty. The goods sold will have their duties decreased by 10 per cent every year, for 10 years when each country's goods can be sold duty-free to the other country. This comes in accordance with GATT regulations. During these 10 years the Egyptian Commercial Centre will set up a permanent exhibition of Egyptian goods and products in Tunisia in order to acquaint the Tunisian public with the quality and value of Egyptian products.

New airport for Marsa Alam underway

FEASIBILITY studies for the construction and management of Marsa Alam airport have been carried out and El-Kharafi Co was selected, among other bidders, to lay out the design of the airport, Eng Fekri Abdel-Wahab, El-Kharafi Group representative in Egypt, stated.

Abdel-Wahab added that a company will be set up to finance, implement and manage the airports for 50 years, with a capital of LE140 million of which El-Kharafi Group will contribute 30 per cent. Priority will be given for employees in the Civil Aviation Authority in managing the new airport because of their expertise.

He also said that the initial cost of the project is estimated at LE80 million and that the whole project will be completed in 36 months.

PMEC to hold seminars

WITHIN the framework of international seminars organised by the Professional Management Expertise Centre (PMEC), a series of four seminars will be held over a period of 3 days, from 15-17 March 1997, with special guest Dr Ibrahim El-Fiqi, one of the leading international figures in the art of persuading, influencing, selling and marketing in Canada and the United States, who will participate in the third seminar entitled "Unleashing the Power of Communications".

Dr Abdel-Rahman Tawfiq, chairman of the board of PMEC, said that another seminar will deal with the topic "Connecting with the Self", involving ways of finding your strong points and how to harness them to gain influence and efficiency in managerial skills and leadership.

Another seminar, "Connecting with People" concerns 10 ways to unleash the power of communications, and how to bring out the strong points in others to gain their support.

Dr Abdel-Rahman added that this seminar will meet during the day, while at night, the fourth seminar, entitled "Without Limits" will be held, which will deal with mastering talents in the art of selling and marketing, building upon already existing service and selling skills.

New IBM training centres

SINCE IBM began its policy of providing direct support to its customers in Egypt, it took only 2 years before IBM training centres were located in every governorate throughout the country. From its first training centre located at the head office, IBM quickly established 14 more, located in 8 governorates, and 6 more are expected to be constructed in 1997.

In 1996, IBM established a training association which serves more than 10,000 students, providing them with education and training in a variety of fields, from computer science and business.

IBM now intends to expand its operations within the framework of these training centres, until they are located in all areas of all governorates.

With this goal in mind, IBM is seeking qualified entrepreneurs to participate in setting up and operating training centres. Qualified persons must agree to follow the rules and stipulations set forth by IBM.

For more information on how you can take part in this unique opportunity, contact IBM's headquarters, located on 56 Gameat Al-Dowal Al-Arabiya Street, Mohandessin, Cairo, tel. 3492533, fax 3601227.

Al-Ahram Weekly

Cents and sensibility

By its very nature, it seems, money has become the language of a world that would now be integrated into one global market. Few, in fact, dispute this point. Profit, argued the heads of multinational corporations attending the Davos World Economic Forum meeting this week, will lead to prosperity and security. And, over all, the various world leaders in attendance, agreed. So much so that pundits and observers stated it was the heads of multinational corporations who defined the text and tone of Davos.

But as President Mubarak and the newly-elected UN secretary- general were quick to point out, the challenge facing a changing world order seeking to come together via the reduction of tariffs, increasing exports and free trade, or maximising productivity, is to find an equitable median between the mechanisms of capitalism and the calls for justice and sovereignty issued by those it seeks to include in its balance. In other words, peace and economic prosperity are not mutually exclusive, but actually reflect the uneasy symbiosis through which a society meets both immediate needs and long-range goals.

Mubarak did not mince words while making this point, not only in Davos, but also at MENA III. Normalisation of relations between Israel and the Arab world, as well as its integration into a regional economic order, hinges on its commitment to abide by not only Oslo, but now also the Hebron Protocols.

If Israel is indeed serious in striking a comprehensive peace with its Arab neighbours, it will have to do more than offer a framework of peace laden with loopholes and escape clauses. Moreover, if it would seek to increase its economic role in the region, as well as in the world, then now, more than ever, it must afford its "partners in peace" the same measure of respect and justice that it demands on a daily basis from any and all. And, if a desire for stability and security is not, in its own right, incentive enough for the unconditional pursuit of peace on all tracks, then perhaps the language of money spoken fluently at Davos, will be.

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An integrated future

Speaking at the World Economic Forum President Mubarak clarified the strategic priorities that will direct policy well into the next century, writes Ibrahim Nafie

President Hosni Mubarak's keynote address to the World Economic Forum in Davos on Sunday was one of the most significant recent speeches made by the Egyptian president. It was delivered before an international gathering of representatives from major international institutions, transnational corporations and influential public figures, at a conference that, in Mubarak's own words, counts among the events that will determine the pattern of international relations in the 21st century.

In his speech Mubarak drove home the concerns of both Egypt and the Third World, addressing five pivotal and inter-related issues pertaining to the current world order.

Of the technological revolution and, in particular, the revolution in information technology, which has become a foundation for the international order at the end of the 20th century Mubarak said: "The availability of data has, quantitatively at least, been revolutionised. It is just one of many revolutions that have expanded *the boundaries of thought and ideas. This technological leap*, which even a few years ago could not have been predicted, has opened new possibilities for everyone to participate in the creation of an international information bank."

The prospect of such an enormous storehouse of information led to the second point in the president's speech: globalisation. Globalisation, as generally conceived, has been manifested by supranational economic institutions such as the IMF, the World Bank and the World Trade Organisation, and by transnational and transcontinental organisations such as the European Union and its American and Asian free trade counterparts, as well as those associations — multinational companies whose international sales reap profits that outstrip the GNP of many countries — that depend upon the movement of private capital across national and regional boundaries.

Developments in communications, transportation, tourism and international migration, less obvious manifestations of this process of globalisation, have nonetheless made it possible, for the first time, to entertain the idea of a universal culture that will not only reformulate national economies but will influence local and regional cultures and identities.

President Mubarak touched on the core of this phenomenon when he said that "principles of globalisation have come to rule our planet. They are jointly held principles pertaining to financial equilibrium and stability, monetary control, flexible markets, stable stock exchanges, and full employment. *These are principles which in* turn should be considered restrictions imposed upon us by global openness... Globalisation also implies jointly held beliefs with regards to democracy, freedom and the respect for human rights which it is our duty to observe in the formulation of those decisions which effect our daily lives."

Unequal shares in the technological revolution, and therefore in the process of globalisation, however, led Mubarak to express some reservations about current trends, not least because *the lack of parity can place enormous* pressures on the economies of developing countries which can encounter many difficulties in implementing structural adjustment programmes. For this reason Mubarak was careful to warn of the dangers of "marginalisation, division and dissension", and urged the international community to consider assistance to struggling economies as a joint responsibility.

In response to the kind of clash of civilisation theses propagated by analysts such as Samuel Huntington, President Mubarak was keen to stress that "cultural pluralism... does not necessarily *have to lead to confrontation and conflict*. The common denominators that bind countries together far exceed those issues that separate them. All of us have a major interest in preserving an equitable balance between North and South, between East and West and between the rich and the poor."

The fourth issue Mubarak addressed concerned Egypt's *own position* in the world order. In this context, we would do well to remember an earlier speech, to the Cairo Economic Summit, in which the president underlined Egypt's *desire to fully integrate within the emerging* international economic order. In Davos he confirmed this policy orientation when he said: "Our country today has become part of the global structure. Egypt is now part of the international economy in such a way as brooks no return." After citing Egypt's achievements in economic reform, and the increasing role played by the private sector and the free market, he added that the Egyptian economy now constitutes "a system — for which we are building the institutions, formulating the laws and training the people — that enables us to share in the international economy."

President Mubarak then went on to reaffirm Egypt's belief that establishing peace must be the cornerstone of its foreign policy. "There must," he said, "be permanent, comprehensive peace in order to safeguard the security and stability of all countries. We want to establish a region free from fear, aggression and destruction. However, for peace to produce this result requires the free and willing consent of all peoples concerned. Peace must rest on the principles of justice and equality for all. In addition, all nations, without exception, must be permitted to exercise their rights to self-determination and to live in dignity."

"The international economy," the president concluded, "is a compilation of universal policies and multi-party institutions. But above all it represents a state of mind."

It is this "state of mind" that has been at the core of Egyptian thinking over recent years. And Egypt's choice to integrate itself into the *international economy is consistent with* such thinking. It is a choice that steers us towards development and progress.

Many Egyptian intellectuals have urged, over the past years, for a clearer conceptualisation of Egypt's strategic priorities in order to enable it to confront the challenges that have arisen as the century draws to a close. Indeed, precisely this point was raised when the president inaugurated the newly opened Al-Ahram printing press in 6 October City. And now President *Mubarak has given the lead* in clarifying such strategic priorities. In his speech before the Davos World Economic Forum, he has succeeded in the task of delineating the perimetres of an ideological project capable of steering Egypt beyond the current phase.

A Likud-Labour 'understanding'

Mohamed Sid-Ahmed questions whether the concomitance of two apparently unrelated events responds to a wider pattern: a Likud-Labour agreement this week, and the Copenhagen Declaration

It was officially announced in Israel that representatives from some right-wing parties have reached an agreement with high-ranking members of the Labour Party on a number of key issues to be addressed in the final stage of the Palestinian-Israeli negotiations. By virtue of the 'document of understanding' known as the Beilin-Eitan document, Labour can claim that it has forced the right-wing parties to retreat from some of their more extreme positions, while the right-wing parties, for their part, can claim that they have succeeded in transforming some of the demands raised by Labour and rejected by them into purely formal ones. The question is whether the document should be seen, *from an Arab point of view*, as a positive or a negative development.

The main argument put forward by Labour in defence of the agreement is that it has consecrated the rift between the ruling coalition and its extreme right-wing factions, whose opposition to the Hebron agreement has made the Likud government appear closer to the centre right than the far right. Likud's agreement with Labour can be seen as signaling the coming together of Israel's two main secular parties in a broad coalition. The agree*ment, which is a target of crit*icism from the left and rejected by the far right, can be said to be more representative of the mainstream of Israeli public opinion.

The authors of the document belong to a new generation of skilled Israeli politicians, and include opposition figures like Yossi Beilin, Peres' right hand man in the negotiations and one of the architects of the Oslo Accords; Chaim Ramon, a former head of the Histadrut and a rising star in the Labour firmament; and Shlomo Ben Ami, a leading member of its strategic research establishment. On the government side, they include, in addition to Netanyahu's close associate, Michael Eitan, representatives of Likud, Tsomet and Geishar. It is worth recalling here that Beilin is a candidate for the leadership of Labour after Peres' forthcoming retirement. His key role in initiating the agreement with Likud *improves his chances of being* elected against General Ehud Barak, the leading contender for the post.

Apologists of the agreement claim that one positive development since it was signed is that Netanyahu has stopped making the highly inflammatory statements which so angered the Arabs and which were totally irreconcilable with their demands. In fact, it has become more difficult for Likud now to use the 'security before peace' slogan to justify obstructing the peace process and limiting it to what serves *Israel's security* concerns only. The agreement is a tacit admission by Netanyahu that his attempt to torpedo the entire peace process has failed.

But the Labour negotiators too have made substantial concessions. In exchange for Likud's accepting the idea of some kind of 'Palestinian entity', albeit one deprived of the prerogatives of sovereignty, Beilin and his team accepted the idea of Labour's dropping its insistence that an end be brought to the establishment of new settlements. They also tacitly accepted that the settlements now existing in Arab territories would remain under Israeli sovereignty — and protection. Those deep inside the Palestinian self-rule areas would be linked by special corridors to Israel and protected by its military forces. Such complicated arrangements make it difficult to foresee how Israel will establish *its final borders*.

From the Likud viewpoint, there is no question of granting the Palestinians sovereign prerogatives. The Palestinian entity will not be authorised to sign agreements with any third party Israel sees as a threat to its security. However, Beilin has suggested that it need not be deprived of the right to be called a state, even if it enjoys none of the attributes that would qualify it as such. Similarly, although they are as insistent as the Likud that Jerusalem should remain united and the exclusive capital *of Israel, the Labour negotiators* have no objection that the capital of the Palestinian entity be called El-Quds, provided it is established outside the municipal limits of the city of Jerusalem, including Eastern (Arab) Jerusalem.

On the issue of Palestinian refugees, both Likud and Labour refuse that the right of return be granted to any Palestinians outside the self-rule areas, and even those who do return to those areas will have to remain within certain quotas. The document, however, is not comprehensive and does not address all the contentious issues between Labour and Likud.

I have always advocated that the Arab parties should take advantage of the differences of opinion inside Israel, especially since Netanyahu has come to power. Unfortunately, the chances of successfully playing *on these differences have been* greatly reduced in the context of the centre-right coalition now in the making between Likud and Labour following the signing of the Hebron agreement. That is one of the main reasons I opposed the recent Copenhagen meeting. Whatever the aim of its initiators, it is bound to develop a mesh of relations between parties, whether inside Israel (between Labour and Likud), or overspilling beyond it (between the members of the Copenhagen group) which, under Netanyahu's leadership, will shape *the events to come in a direction* that can hardly be described as conducive to a comprehensive peace 'based on balanced and equal rights for all'.

Feasts of words

By Naguib Mahfouz

From early boyhood onwards I never studied at all during the month of Ramadan, although this was the month during which I read more than at any other time. My reading, however, had nothing to do with my studies, and reading was my great joy during this month, greater than at any other time of the year. During the fast I could give free rein to my passion for reading, but not for any school literature.

I carried this habit into my adult life after finishing my studies, so that I never wrote during the holy month of Ramadan, just as I never wrote during the summer months. When Ramadan fell in summer I thus gained one month of writing during the year, as opposed to one month less when Ramadan occurred in winter. During Ramadan I would give myself up to spiritual delights.

I would read an enormous amount during this month, and one year, while still a university student, I read the whole of the Holy Qur'an. This was a very special reading, very different from reading it on ordinary occasions. Another year I read the *Life of the Prophet* by Ibn Hisham, and I remember reading *Selected Arabic Literature* by Dr Taha Hussein, Sheikh El-Sakandari and Ali El-Garem, which contained selections of Arab poetry and prose from the pre-Islamic era to modern times. I also read El-Zayat's *History of Arabic Literature*, as well as a book I greatly treasured containing brief outlines on the histories of Sufi sheikhs and selections of their writings. I remember that during my first years at university I read plays by Bernard Shaw, the poems of T.S. Eliot and any new publications by El-Aqqad and El-Mazni. I read the *Islamiyat* of El-Aqqad and Taha Hussein's autobiography — I always chose literature which fitted in with spiritual reflection and philosophy. I read every day throughout the afternoon after returning from work or finishing my studies.

Based on an interview with Mohamed Salmawy.

The Press This Week

'Deviant youth'

Al-Gomhuria: "I had hoped that the press would deal with what has become known as the 'Satanists' case' with restraint as befitting the month of Ramadan when the devils — even the press and publishing devils — are locked up... *Had this happened the press would not have given* such extended and unbalanced sensationalist coverage to the case. It was not ashamed to publish the full names of the accused and their pictures and did not refrain from *cheap gossip in the attempt to guess the names* of some of the parents who are public figures. In doing so, the press overlooked its social responsibility, all professional ethics and the basic rule that the names and pictures of adolescents involved in crimes are not to be published even if there is a court ruling against them, the aim being to help bring them back to the right path and safeguard their future."
(Salah Eissa, 30 January)

Al-Ahram: "The way in which the Satanists' case has been dealt with by state security, the press, the media and the men of religion has created more problems than it has solved. It has not achieved the goal of curbing the phenomenon in the required rational and tactful manner which would safeguard the future of great numbers of youth by helping them back onto the right path. This policy of 'deterrence'... and scandal-mongering will achieve nothing."
(Salama Ahmed Salama, 1 February)

Akhbar El-Yom: "Who is responsible for young people in this country? Why do they become gun-toting extremists or devil worshippers? Who is to blame? Is it the break-up of the family under financial pressure, the collapse of values and the absence of role models? Is it the failure of the political organisations to lead youth? Is it the political vacuum? Is it the ramifications of the old plan to get youth obsessed with football clubs so as to distance them from politics? Is it preventing university students from engaging in politics and discussing the problems of their country? Is it bad planning on the part of the organisations responsible for youth affairs? Before we condemn those young people we should first condemn the adults."
(Ahmed Ragab, 1 February)

Al-Arabi: "Undoubtedly the most exciting Ramadan serial is that of the Satanists... [It has] all the attractive ingredients — religion, sex, drugs and make-believe and some known names. This is how the press treated the case and the young people were 'butchered' before they were even tried and before the facts were fully known. In the midst of all this, the real case was lost. Society should have asked: why did this happen? And who is to blame *and who is the victim? And how should we deal with this case within its true context without exaggeration?*"
(Galal Aref, 3 February)

Al-Ahram: "Devil worship is a natural culmination of prevalent Western thought. It is what secularism leads to after besieging religion and the sacred and destroying all that is absolute in faith and morality. This has been done under attractive slogans such as freedom of thought, intellectual creativity, rationalism and others. We should not be surprised at the discourse of the Satanists whose thinkers have gone to the furthest limits and broken through every red light in their search for creativity. Had they moved more slowly and covered up some of their actions, we might even have found some people cheering them and defending their right of 'expression and interpretative judgement.'"
(Fahmi Howeidy, 28 January)

Al-Wafd: "To be frank, everybody is guilty. Instead of sternly and harshly straightening out the youth, we should give them real legitimate and safe channels of participation within the context of public welfare... We should open doors for them to gain their trust and make them feel worthwhile, giving them hope that through this they can get self-satisfaction and interact with their society. This would safeguard them against all imported fads or retreat to the past."
(Ayman Nour, 28 January)

Rose El-Youssef: "We should see to it that the Satanists' case should not turn into mass hysteria. The case is interesting to the press, the police and, of course, to anyone concerned about the future of his offspring. Yet correcting this deviation does not require hysteria in hurling accusations against the youth on every occasion. Evil and deviation must not be combated with the hysterical promulgation and enforcement of laws which could lead to more deviation."
(Fathi Ghanem, 3 February)

Compiled by **Hala Saqr**



Can an artist draw a voice? This was the question I asked myself as I listened to President Mubarak's speech in Davos, Switzerland, this week. And if so, how? Well I began with an open mouth, symbolising President Mubarak's call for a new international climate that would foster the economies of developing countries. And in deference to the importance of both the message conveyed and the international forum in which it was delivered I have made a prominent feature of the microphones into which the president speaks while smiling with optimism.

هكذا من الأصل

Close up

Salama A. Salama

No patent on peace

The declaration issued in Copenhagen by the International Alliance for Peace in the Middle East was severely criticised by many, and confirmed that attempts to reach peace through secret channels and under-the-table deals only increase doubts and suspicion and create confusion and uncertainty which can destroy the desired objective, no matter how noble it may be.

Symposia and debates have been held for years in European and American capitals between Israeli and Arab intellectuals and politicians of various persuasions, the latter attending in an unofficial capacity, who sought to exchange views, increase mutual understanding, eliminate mistrust, find the psychological and intellectual bases on which to build peace, and stop the media campaigns which only serve to widen differences and stir up controversies. But this is the first time that a meeting of individuals from both sides, probably representing only themselves, has formed an international "alliance" under the patronage of a European state, Denmark, heretofore not renowned for its particular interest in Middle Eastern affairs. The representative of the European Union was invited at the last minute, before the declaration was issued.

The meetings and discussions which preceded the declaration were held behind closed doors, which is very much reminiscent of the secrecy surrounding the Oslo negotiations between the Palestinians and the Israelis. The resulting agreement is still the cause of many blunders and much confusion.

True, there are considerable differences between discussions, held by intellectuals and businessmen, which result in some general principles designed to advance the peace process on a popular level and resolve specific differences, and official negotiations carried out by delegations receiving their instructions from their governments. In the latter case, the person issuing a resolution is responsible for any concessions made or promises given. But when a group of Arabs decides to issue a joint declaration with the Israelis — even if it is unofficial — this affects the inalienable rights of the Palestinians, and undermines the right of Syria and Lebanon to recover occupied territory. Nor did the Arabs in Copenhagen call for the elimination of nuclear weapons. These failures angered some sections of the public and were condemned by those who felt that the group involved was not representative and did not express the views of the majority of Arabs.

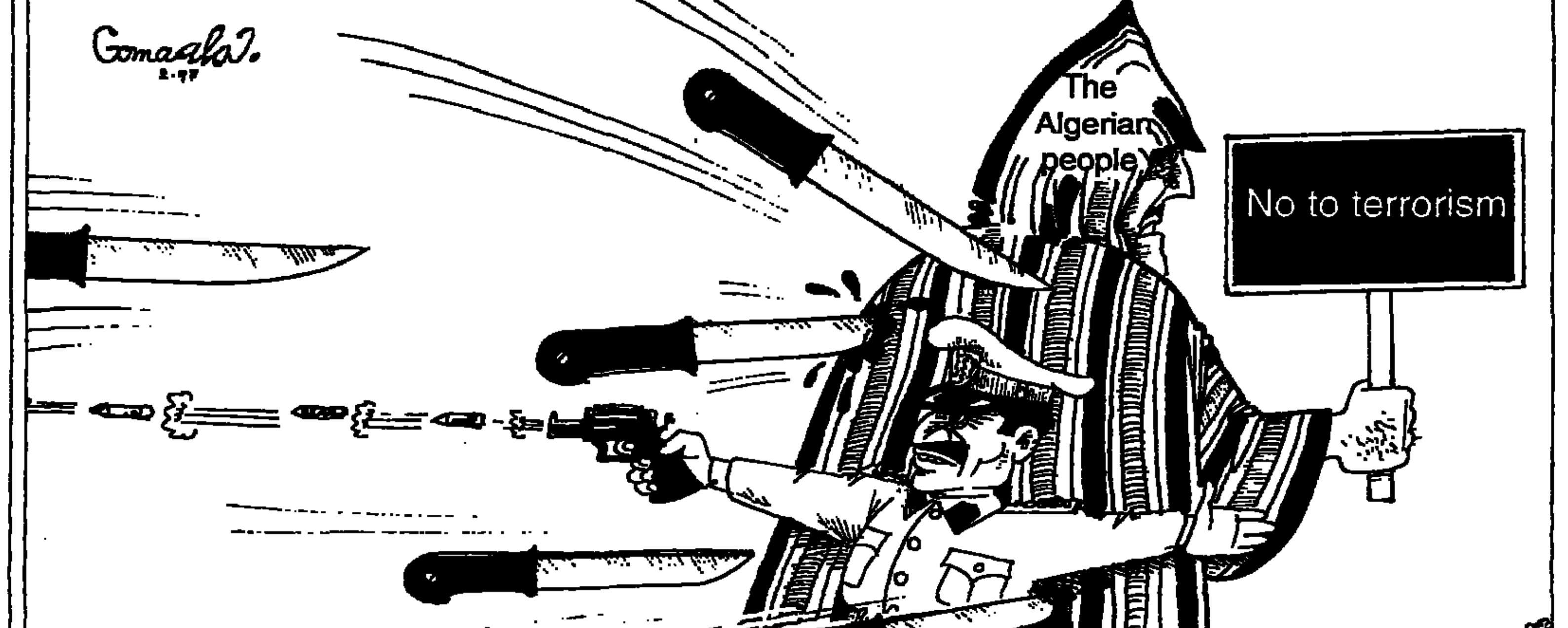
We accept the fact that it is the right of those working for peace on either side to put an end to the Arab-Israeli conflict and to point out the correct path all advocates of peace must follow; but those who decide to take matters into their own hands may do so only on the basis of the inalienable right of all the peoples of the region to live in peace, security and complete sovereignty over their territory.

A constant dialogue with advocates of peace in Israel may be acceptable, or even desirable. Efforts between the two parties should be coordinated in order to supervise the agreements reached and their implementation. This guarantees the establishment of a real peace, but we have yet to witness even the first steps toward this goal in relations between Palestinians and Israelis.

This "alliance", sadly, represents a mere illusion; it will dissolve into nothing. It only serves to spread Netanyahu's lies, allowing him to delude the world and state that his government is in the process of implementing the peace agreements, that a new point has been reached with the Hebron agreement and that Israel wishes to begin a new round of negotiations with Syria.

The Copenhagen Declaration, however, no matter what misgivings it arouses, and the alliance, despite the criticism it deserves, in no way justify questions regarding the patriotism of the participants. After all, it is their duty to work for the peace process. Perhaps their patriotism has been called into question because we have not produced any popular initiatives. Our government has not respected any civilian efforts. That is why so many were taken aback when Foreign Minister Amr Moussa took it upon himself to welcome the alliance.

Perhaps the time has come. If the peace process is too critical an issue for governments to work out, then it is the privilege of the opponents of this alliance to start a counter-alliance. Peace is not the exclusive property of one or the other.



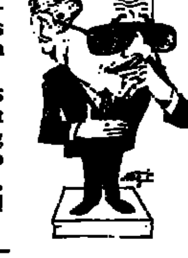
Soapbox

Sorry, Satan

Satan certainly has little to do with this group of youngsters designated as "Satan worshippers" by the media. Satan has a far more important and solemn task in life than this farce indicates. It seems inconceivable that Satan, who refused to bow down before Adam because their respective substances (fire and dust) were incompatible, should today consent to associate himself with these youngsters, of whom the least one can say is that they were not brought up properly. Does it seem credible that Satan — arrogance incarnate — who claims omniscience and omnipotence, would willingly become the follower and servant of Adam's offspring? And what offspring: covered in tattoos, their music a hallucinatory cacophony, their clothes from the Salvation Army.

I am sure Satan can do better. He may have caused bloody conflagrations which cost millions of lives. But he would not waste his time on a gang of teenagers with painted faces and torn black clothes. These youngsters are lost souls, whose parents keep their pockets well lined with banknotes, but whose lives ring hollow. They are superficial and empty-headed, leading idle and aimless lives. They are certainly not worth Satan's energy.

I solemnly apologise to Satan. His anger kindled, he may turn against mankind in vengeance. The young people who stand accused are no Satan worshippers; they do, however, worship idleness, triviality and frivolity.



This week's soapbox speaker is a columnist, writing for several magazines and newspapers.

Mahmoud El-Saadani

Exploring common ground

The Copenhagen Declaration does not fulfil all the demands of Palestinians and Arabs, writes Abdel-Moneim Said; but anti-Israel armchair wars of rhetoric have led to nothing so far, and the pragmatists' millimetre is a step, after all

Egyptian and Arab readers have a right to know the true ramifications of the Copenhagen Declaration of the International Alliance for Arab-Israeli Peace. This document, made public on Thursday 30 January, was jointly produced by a collection of intellectuals, writers, public figures and businessmen representing the European Union, Egypt, Israel, Palestine and Jordan. It is important, without embroiling ourselves in heated debate with those who opposed this step, to put this initiative in its proper perspective from two standpoints: first, to what extent it serves Egyptian and Arab national aims, and, secondly, what prospects it offers for the future.

I do not believe anyone contests the fact that peace is one of the most vital objectives for the future of our people, our nations and future generations. At this point, however, views begin to diverge among Arab intellectuals. Some believe that peace is unattainable in the region as long as Israel is permitted to continue to exist, since its continued existence represents a perpetual aggression against the Arab nation and the Palestinian people. Others are appalled by the tragic legacy which helped pave the way for Israel to expand its restricted boundaries, as defined by the original partition resolution, expanding over the Golan Heights, the Sinai, the remainder of Palestine, and, at certain junctures, portions of Lebanon all the way to Beirut. For this trend, peace implies the return of land occupied by Israel since 1967 in exchange for Arab recognition of Israel as one of the nations of the region.

This viewpoint has its historical and legal origins in Nasser's acceptance of UN Security Council Resolution 242 and the subsequent Rogers initiative. Following the October 1973 War, Security Council Resolution 338 put into motion the mechanism of internationally sponsored direct negotiations as a vehicle for implementing Resolution 242. Since then, Arab efforts on all fronts have been geared toward the application of these resolutions in accordance with the Arab point of view, founded upon the principle of total peace in return for the full restoration of land. This process did not take place with the conclusion of a single historic deal. Rather, it transpired gradually through a series of negotiated agreements from the disengagement agreements on the Egyptian and Syrian fronts in 1974 to the recent Hebron agreement.

During the three decades which have passed since the war of June 1967, Arab opinion has been split. On one side are those who reject the entire process, from Resolution 242 to the Oslo agreement, on the grounds that all these agreements are merely a succession of steps toward surrender and the renunciation of Arab rights. Among the proponents of this viewpoint are those who believe that the Arab-Israeli conflict will only be resolved through a decisive battle. Unfortunately, Arab armies have only headed toward Tehran, Beirut, Chad and Kuwait and, far from being revolutionised, Arab societies still strain under the burdens of backwardness and underdevelopment.

As for the opposing camp, it sought to pursue the prospects of peace through a political process engaging political, economic and diplomatic efforts that have succeeded in regaining Arab land piece by piece. Military action and resorting to violence were no more than tools through which the Arabs could enhance their negotiating position or recapture international attention at times when it became overly distracted by other matters. Thus, the War of Attrition opened the way for the Rogers initiative, the October War was the catalyst that triggered the disengagement agreements and the Egyptian-Israeli peace treaty, and the Palestinian Intifada galvanised the world and led to the Madrid conference and the Oslo Accords. Similarly, I predict that resistance activities in southern Lebanon will escalate or subside according to progress made in the Syrian-Israeli negotiations.

The initiative that gave rise to the Copenhagen Declaration falls within the scope of the constructive pragmatism espoused by this contingent. Firstly, the initiative has mobilised the international attention that the Arabs have always sought and focused it on Arab demands after years during which the world powers appeared only to be influenced by the Israeli viewpoint. In spite of this success, one can only be taken aback by the ferment this has stirred among the opposing camp, whose members have consistently urged for appeals to international public opinion and yet decry the first serious attempt in this direction. One cannot help but be struck by the irony that this camp has not taken a single practical step during the past decade, but rather contented itself with a clamour of conferences and communiqués that succeeded in convincing no one but themselves.

Secondly, the initiative has spurred the concerted European action that Arab politicians and intellectuals have long desired. All the members of the European Union participated in this initiative; the EU representative in the Middle East left Damascus at 4.00am on the day of the declaration in order to arrive in Copenhagen in time for the official announcement. Yet once again, one is surprised by the other camp's reaction. Since the end of the Cold War, Egyptian and Arab intellectuals saw in Europe a new political pole that was increasingly eager to assert its own, distinct interests. They applauded France's stance on the Israeli invasion of Lebanon and the EU's appointment of a permanent representative to participate in solving the Middle East conflict.

In other words, they have encouraged a more active European role in order to counterbalance that of the US. Yet when some people actually moved to take specific action, they were immediately labeled as agents of the devil, probably for refusing to yield once again to that age-old Arab tradition in accordance with which words are the only deed we are capable of performing well.

The initiative has appealed to broad and active segments of Israeli public opinion from the far left to the centre of the Labour Party and even elements within the right wing. Since the mid-seventies, these diverse segments of Israeli public opinion have gradually come to realise that the future of Israel in the region depends upon its ability to reach a compromise with the Arabs. These segments inside Israel pressured Menachem Begin to withdraw from the Sinai following President Sadat's initiative; they took to the streets to protest against Sabra and Shatila. These protests, the likes of which no Arab capital has witnessed and which comprised some 400,000 demonstrators, were directly instrumental in forcing Begin to withdraw from most of Lebanon with the exception of the southern zone. These segments of Israeli public opinion also voted against Netanyahu in last year's Israeli elections and added their voice to that of the Palestinians, the Arabs and other international parties in pressuring Netanyahu, for the first time in his life, to relinquish the notion of Greater Israel and to accept the terms of the Oslo agreement.

The Copenhagen initiative succeeded in winning over these segments of Israeli public opinion — before international, and in particular European, public opinion — to the obligations that conform with the Arab interpretation of the pertinent UN resolutions and the Oslo agreements. These internationally sanctioned documents stipulate that the Palestinian people have a right to self-determination, which includes the right to establish a state; that the problem of Jerusalem must be resolved in a manner acceptable to all parties, including the Palestinians; that the Israeli government must call a halt to the construction of settlements and the confiscation of publicly and privately owned Palestinian land; that the settlements between Israel, on one hand, and Syria and Jordan, on the other, must take place on the basis of Security Council resolutions and the principle of land for peace; that security implies the security of all parties, not just Israel alone; and that measures should be taken toward the creation of a region free of weapons of mass destruction.

Additionally, perhaps the most important accomplishment of the initiative has been to enlist all its participants, including the Israelis and other international parties, in the effort to monitor the implementation of the agreements from which Netanyahu has so persistently attempted to extricate himself and to guard against all forms of collective punishment and human rights violations perpetuated against the Palestinian people.

The detractors of the Copenhagen Declaration deplored the Oslo Accords and swore that "Gaza and Jericho first" would be "Gaza and Jericho last" (the stance they took with regard to the disengagement agreements in the '70s) ; they saw Netanyahu's arrival to power as the end of the peace process and the return to the struggle between life and death. After their long history of ignoring Arab and international potential for getting Israel to budge, sometimes by kilometres and at others by millimetres, once again they overlooked the latent capacity of Israeli public opinion, large portions of which have come close to the Arab perspective, to push for progress from within.

Of course, the Copenhagen initiative could not hope to answer all the Arabs' demands, but it has brought a considerable sector of Israeli public opinion into line with principles which they previously refused to acknowledge. As such, it is more profound and sophisticated than anything that has been agreed upon before; it reflects the same motives that inspired Syria, Lebanon, Jordan and the PLO to embark on the peace process in Madrid.

More importantly, the Copenhagen Declaration does not signify that we have reached the end of the road, or that all Arab-Israeli differences have been resolved. The Arabs still have a right to insist that the final negotiations result in a Palestinian state whose capital is East Jerusalem, that the existing settlements are dismantled, that the Palestinians are given the right to return, and that Israel withdraws from all occupied Syrian and Lebanon territory *in exchange for complete and total* peace.

The Copenhagen Declaration thus represents a consensus over a minimum common ground to serve as a basis for cooperation among the Arab and Israeli forces for peace. It offers a formula more advanced than that of Resolution 242, which has served so far as the basis for negotiation between Israel, Egypt and Jordan in the past and between Israel, Syria, Lebanon and the PLO at present.

In light of this, the Palestinian political forces appear far more mature than their Egyptian counterparts, who have always vaunted the PLO as the "sole and legitimate" representative of the Palestinian people. But when this representative begins to take practical action, particularly after internationally monitored free elections, Egyptian political forces suddenly withdraw their mandate and declare that the PLO's strategy must fall in line with their conferences and communiqués.

The Palestinian forces that participated in drawing up the Copenhagen Declaration, however, were not solely members of the PLO, the Palestinian National Council, or the elected Palestinian Legislative Assembly. They included prominent leaders from the Palestinian opposition, such as Sheikh Jamil Hamami from Hamas, Mohamed Jadallah, a member of the central committee of the Democratic Front, and Riyad Al-Maliki of the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine. It is true that these representatives attended the Copenhagen conference in their personal capacity, as did all other participants. But no communiqué issued from the comfortable armchairs of Cairo can detract from the intelligence and fighting spirit these representatives showed.

Indeed, perhaps the most remarkable characteristic of the entire Palestinian delegation was that it resembled a graduating class from the Israeli prison system. Hatem Abdel-Qader, a member of the Palestinian Legislative Assembly, had spent 15 years in Israeli prisons; Marwan Al-Barghouti, a prominent leader of the Intifada, served a six-year sentence. All these individuals, with their record of commitment to the struggle, have come to see the possibility of rescuing Arab rights through an international alliance for Arab-Israeli peace comprising large sectors of Israeli public opinion, in conjunction with the on-going struggle that continues to receive solid Arab and Egyptian support.

Nevertheless, there are some who are "more royal than the king" and who insist on pointing their fingers at these dupes, in spite of their long history of struggle on the field, in Israeli prisons and at the negotiating table.

For these people, questions of normalisation or boycott are not goals in themselves. They are means to attain their legitimate ends. Boycott in the past almost lost the whole of Palestine, while our experience with limited normalisation within the context of the Oslo Accords has given these Palestinians a powerful lever against Netanyahu.

The Hebron agreement and subsequent agreements would never have been possible had the Arabs not committed themselves to peace as the strategic option for the Arab nation. Nor did words alone suffice, as was the case when the peace process reached a deadlock and Egypt cooled the process of normalisation with Israel, as did Jordan, Qatar, Tunisia, and Morocco, as a signal to Netanyahu that Israel and its future generations will have to forfeit peace if he refuses to implement the agreements that have been reached.

Indeed, that is perhaps what instigated many Israelis to send their delegates to Copenhagen and prompted Knesset member Ya'il Dayan to announce that the Israeli settlements do not pose a threat to the Palestinians alone, but also to the Israelis because they jeopardise the peace process and generate extremism and violence which threatens Israel proper. According to one Israeli writer, the noblest cause in the world at present is that of the Palestinian people, because *it is the cause of freedom and liberty*.

Is it wise for us to ignore all this and to exclude the Palestinian, Jordanian and Israeli forces that are earnestly seeking peace? Is it sufficient to issue statements and pronounce slogans and then return to our homes content that we have fulfilled our duty and liberated Palestine over the microphone? Is it wise to ignore the possibilities that are now available to us following the Copenhagen initiative and which should enable us to transform it into an effective Arab, Israeli, European and international popular monitoring instrument so as to ensure the literal implementation of all agreements and the destruction of the settlements? Should we pawn the future of our national development and of our children against idle statements, none of which have proven themselves true over the past five decades?

Egyptian Foreign Minister Amr Moussa could not have been more to the point when he criticised those who condemned the initiative for lack of earnestness and described those Israelis who advocate peace as a vital force in the peace process, particularly at a time when the process faces such jeopardy from all sides. The message could not be clearer. The time for words has ended and the time for action has begun.

The writer is the director of the Al-Ahram Centre for Political and Strategic Studies.

Reflections By Hani Shukrallah

The other option

"Whatsoever man soweth, so he shall also reap," goes the well-known Biblical adage. Well, not always, or at least not in an immediate sense. One of the most interesting features of Palestinian/Arab strategies towards Israel, since that state was founded nearly 49 years ago, is that they have consistently borne fruits which are totally at variance with the seeds the protagonists had presumably set out to sow.

I must hasten to add, however, that first, it has been nearly a quarter century since anything that could be identified as a *strategy* was upheld by the Palestinians, the Arab states, or both, vis-à-vis Israel; and secondly, that the notion of a common Palestinian/Arab strategy is little more than a myth which virtually all of the parties — Arab states, Israelis and Israel's Western backers — have had a stake in sustaining, each for reasons of their own.

Why, then, bring up the question of strategy this late in the day? The answer is simple. The "final status" of Palestine and some eight million Palestinians is now upon us, debates rage fiercely over this, the Oslo process, the Syrian-Lebanese tracks, normalisation, boycott, dialogue, and most recently a Danish-sponsored "Alliance for Peace", passions flare, accusations and counter-accusations are hurled, but, in all of this, rarely is reference made to what we might expect to see even a few years from now, and how our actions today may or may not affect that outcome.

I have suggested before that we know, and have known for some time, almost exactly what lies at the end of the Oslo process — even without the benefit of the recently announced Eitan/Beilin document setting out a common Likud/Labour position on Palestinian final status. We know that the two major Israeli parties and their Washington backers have nothing but bantustans to offer the Palestinians: We know that most, and as things are now heading, probably all the settlements in the West Bank are there to stay, that Israel will maintain control of the border line along the Jordan River, the West Bank will be crisscrossed by a huge network of Israeli-controlled roads and settlements, and Palestinian "statehood" will be exercised through a lightly armed police force, whose "sovereignty" will not exceed guaranteeing Israeli security within disparate and disconnected Palestinian cantons. The Palestinian entity resulting from final status negotiations will be denied (contractually, and subject to penalisation for the slightest transgression) the mere hope of seeking even a semblance of military parity with Israel, and the bulk of the five million diaspora Palestinians will continue to be denied the right of return. In return for Israel's "conceding" them a bantustan, the Palestinians will have to offer heaps upon heaps of contractual guarantees, which will give Israel complete hegemony over their economy and their foreign and domestic policy. We know, furthermore, and the ever-pervasive logic of Israeli security ensures that this is so, that all Israeli "concessions" will be made incumbent on the "good behaviour" of the Palestinian entity, according to timetables which may take us well into the next century, and will be subject furthermore to retraction at the slightest sign of infringement, not just by the Palestinian "Authority" but by any Palestinian force, or even group of individuals.

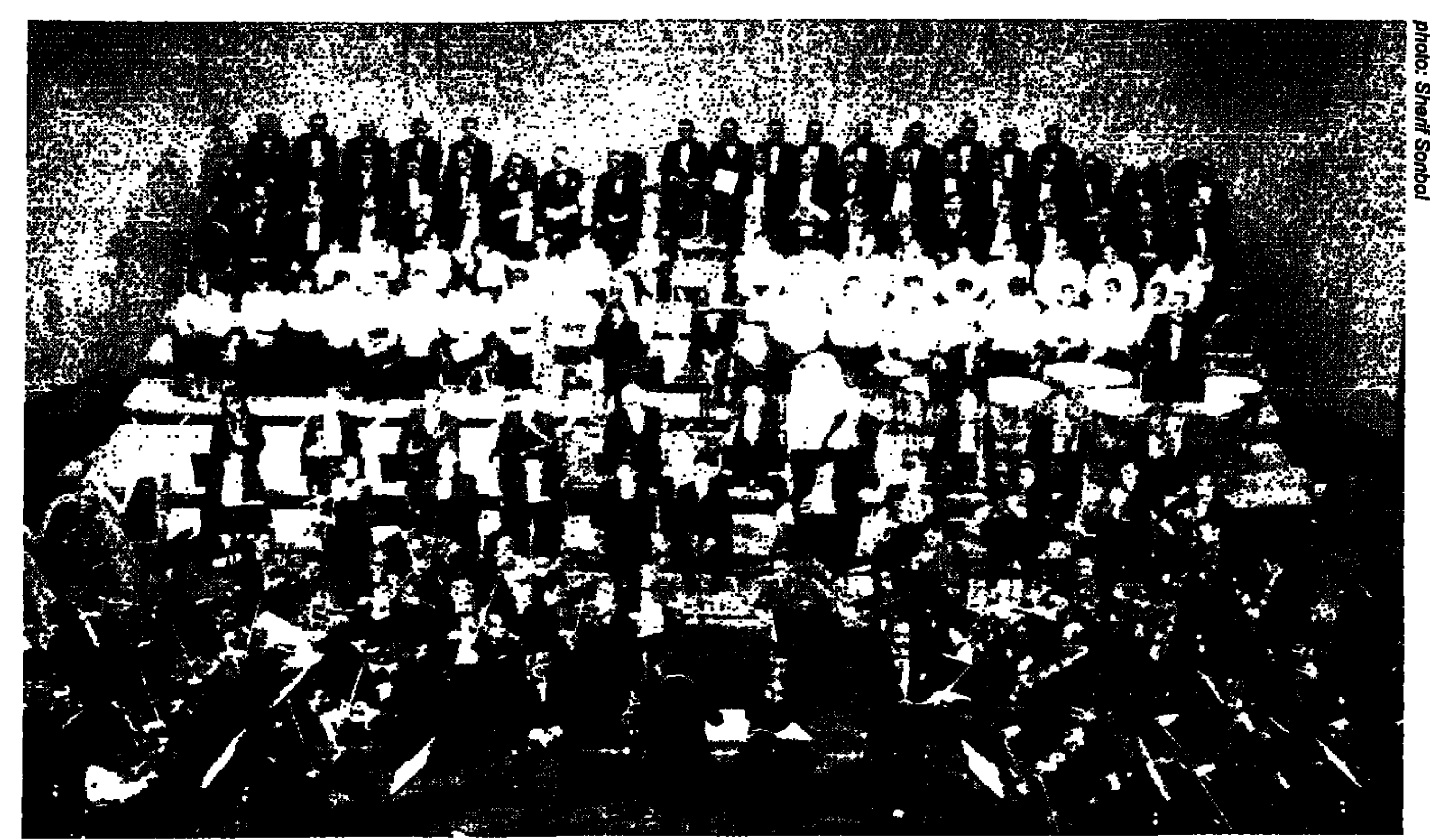
We know also that none of the above is really open to negotiation, and that the remaining portion of the Oslo process has to offer only a little more or a little less of the window-dressing of statehood — similar to the problem raised in Oslo I over Arafat's title — and, at most, a symbolic Palestinian/Muslim presence in Jerusalem, or its environs.

Knowing this, we nevertheless persist in a tedious recitation of the words: full independence, self-determination, statehood, sovereignty, the right of return, making the Middle East a nuclear-free zone, etc. — an incantation which apparently will be incarnated by mere repetition. The inveterate optimists of the peace process have yet to provide us with a single coherent plan of how they intend to achieve these goals.

Their most powerful argument in justification of what they readily admit is an unfair and skewed peace process is the lack of options, the overwhelming imbalance of forces in Israel's favour, America's strategic alliance with Israel and its unwillingness and/or inability to bring pressure to bear upon it. This argument is, however, a double-edged sword. For its advocates need to convince us that, in the few remaining years before the end of the century and of final status negotiations according to Oslo, they have what it takes to tilt the balance sufficiently to transform the American-Israeli proposed bantustan into a fully sovereign state, the independent homeland of some eight million Palestinians.

Even if they admit that this goal is impossible to achieve within the next three or four years, and that all we are able to fight over during this period are the trappings of statehood — since "there are no other options" — they need to convince us that the trappings of statehood will make it easier for us, in a more distant future, to achieve fully sovereign Palestinian statehood. They need to tell us what we should be doing today in order to transcend Oslo's bantustans in that more distant future. And they need to tell us all this in words that are a bit more precise than the habitual references to "revolutionary optimism" and the "immutable will of the fighting Palestinian masses".

It is in this kind of strategic context that, in my view, such issues as the recently announced Copenhagen Declaration and its International Alliance for Peace in the Middle East, should be, and rarely are, discussed.


photo: Sherif Sonbol

To tell a story

David Blake on noise and immortality

A voice speaks a poem. This is a story of voices, earthly ones in conversation with the immortals. Their message is to follow that path in the earthly life in which you do more than the best you can for yourself in the way of salvation, your main duty being to love and assist others to obtain the same path of sanctity. Without proffering such assistance you will not achieve your personal goal, which is salvation; with it you join the spirits of immortality.

It is a hard path, as is the music, and long. The oratorio-like work received its first performance at the Opera House on 2 February, with the full forces of the house to present it. The poem is by Mustafa Mahmoud, the music by Tewfiq El-Basha. the mezzo-soprano was Hanan El-Guindi, the soprano Jihan El-Nasser. Hossam Mustafa sang the baritone part, Mohamed Abou Khier the tenor. Aldo Magnato directed the chorus, while Haig Avakian was responsible for the arrangements. The Cairo Opera Orchestra was conducted by Mustafa Nagui.

The conductor, who can make heavy going of *La Traviata*, did better with the grandly sonorous style of this music, with its masses of big, open tone. The show was opulent, an opulence to which cast, chorus and orchestra all rose. Musically there was no stodge, no false rhetoric or empty attitudes in the performance.

After the opening words a long, long pause and then it commenced — thunder from the orchestra preceding the solidifying of the different aspects of the piece. Thunder was the immortals, of which there were many. And then the earthlings came. The music exhibited compassion, presumably for the human condition. Harps spoke their piece with allure, addressing themselves to the common man. The general effect was portentous but cleverly orchestrated. Some courageous musical effects, splendid voices but unfailingly fortissimo. Magnato's chorus moves in, adding to the largesse, but nothing is ever repetitive. The music is always on the move and has interest. The first 20 minutes are heavy going but the colours are deep magenta, so the required splendour is maintained. If you like big orchestral noise this is it.

Strings, all evening, were rich, and the chorus varied. There was no empty roll-over-and-shout style but the details were vivid.

The soprano — Jihan El-Nasser — attacked the boisterous voice parts with success and the music growled and threatened. The baritone makes his entry. He has a strong voice and clear diction. There was plenty of well-adjusted amplification. So far the huge mechanics of the oratorio hang together. The mezzo, Hanan El-Guindi, has splendour and voice. The Cairo Opera has a new star. She joined the soprano and their tones flooded the theatre. El-Nasser is also an operatic luminary in the making. Neither of these voices spread — they rise out of the orchestra in shaft-like, reassuring gusts.

Next, as the music settles into airy light tones, the baritone joins the women's voices and together they execute first a duet and then a trio. This section of the heavenly converse quietens into peaceful, apparently aphoristic quotes on mortality. The mezzo here has very long and finely written lines of sound. There are none of the usual holes in this music. The voice parts are clearly marked. They begin and end like phrases in ordinary conversation and the piece is genuinely for singers, with one taking up after the other leaves off. Dramatic outbursts do occur, but in spite of the sound pressures put upon them the singers are never forced to shout. Nagui managed his forces cleverly.

The piece now demands that the singers float their voices, warm and peaceful over a golden web of strange, fluttering music. The key is major, and the effect is sweet and tuneful. The baritone intrudes on the scene and the tones go fluid, almost marine. All this spacious noise is definitely oriental. There is simply no way it can be called Western which must surely please the Egypt first perspectivists. This balmy passage uses the mezzo voice to display its range, from depths to highest notes. El-Guindi seems to be an operatic treasure. A tune that has hovered about in the orchestra now breaks out operatically, for mezzo and baritone and finally, at last, for the tenor. And so the final size of the work is attained and a vocal quartet achieved.

The piece goes victoriously into the major key. Each of the four voices is generously offered music that is becoming and flattering to particular timbres. With this assembly the work takes on a prophetic and oracular manner. Coming after the turmoil and stress of the opening pages it is festal and throws light and hope over a generously conceived space-scape. Tenor soars, mezzo fluoresces, soprano tops them with silver and gold and the baritone, as baritones always do, suggests reason and fulfillment. There is even a dance rhythm.

It is obvious that all this sound has been carefully worked out. The quartet is joined by the full chorus and orchestra and an immensely full ensemble is sustained.

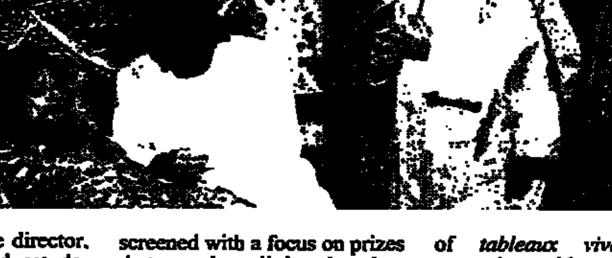
Are you tired? Is the length a little staggering? The audience was held in thrall, or so it seemed. The music, here, remained original and true to itself. And the music is to be praised.

The mezzo, vibrantly thrilling, soared above the sound, which shattered towards the close. Performed for the first time at the Cairo Opera House, the piece did honour, musically, to Ramadan. But the moderately full house offered very cool thanks and then left politely.

Television

Time for a different hand?

Hani Mustafa discovers that there have been few, if any surprises, in Ramadan television programming


Al-Sira Al-Hilaliya

Repetition, a salient feature of Egyptian television that has long furnished caricaturists with ready material, is never more evident than in Ramadan. Take the *Fawazir* (riddles), for example. As a staple of Ramadan entertainment, the *Fawazir* pre-date the establishment of Egyptian television in 1960, having received their first airing on the radio. And initially the *Fawazir* were composed by distinguished colloquial poets like Bairam El-Tunsi and Salah Jahine.

The longevity of the *Fawazir*, after a successful transfer to television, undoubtedly owes something to their popularity with audiences who not only enjoy the actual performances but are also attracted by the excitement generated by the prizes on offer.

This year, the *Fawazir* were performed by the young actress Jihane Nasr who made a memorable television debut two years ago in the serial *Al-Maal Wal-Banoun* (Money and Progeny). This year's *Fawazir* hangs on the cast acting out the bad traits of Nasr's fiancé, not a particular original idea — the suitor theme appeared more than a decade ago, in a *Fawazir* written by Salah Jahine, entitled *Al-Khatba* (The Matchmaker), directed by the late Fahmi Abdel-Hamid and performed by Nelly — but given the longevity of the genre ideas are inevitably recycled.

Those in charge of scheduling have always paired the *Fawazir* with a serial, in the past based on *A Thousand and One Nights*. This year, television essayed a departure from Sherezade's tales by opting for the saga of Beni Hilal, *Al-Sira Al-Hilaliya*. Scenario writer Yousri El-Guindi is to be lauded for his successful adaptation of the saga. However the final product was less than satisfatory due to poor production and a lack of directororial vision, most apparent in the choice of costumes and decor. The director, costume designer and set designer drew heavily on the golden period of Islam, the Ummayid and Abbassid caliphates despite the fact that much of the saga's charm derives from the the fact that the time in which it is set is never specified.

The formulaic pattern of Ramadan television programming was made most obvious this year in the proliferation of programmes based on the "candid camera" format. No less than five programmes have rehashed the idea, though with an unfortunate twist: a number of them sought to extract laughs by abusing "ordinary" people. The pattern has been repeated *ad nauseam*: The man next door is harrassed by the programme presenter until, in response to the victimisation, he loses his temper at which point the show cuts to commercial break. And then we get the same scenario repeated, until Ibrahim Nasr removes his disguise and discloses his identity. Channel 2 alone broadcast two of these programmes during Ramadan.

Such hidden camera type formats tend to meet with ambivalant reactions from the audience. The programme *Shaqawa fi Shaqawa* (Mishief upon Michief), which is shown on Channel 6 (the Delta channel) did not amuse local viewers whose annoyance peaked when the programme showed the presenter trying to convince a peasant to plant a supposedly lucrative crop — pasta. Such programmes are very much commericially lead with advertisers buying a slot of time during which the hidden camera type programme is screened with a focus on prizes that constitute little other than product advertisement.

The format received a slight twist with Channel 2's *Bitqoul Eh?* (What are you Saying?). Presented by actor Reda Hamid, who plays the presenter, it is quite different in style and scenario. Hamid stops someone and asks about a given subject in speech which is half intelligible and half gibberish. Much to the audience's amusement, his interviewees chatter discreetly about the few coherent words they have understood, ignoring the unintelligble bits. More merciful on the ordinary citizen, the programme manages to satirise the genre in which it works.

While Ramadan drama has reached some noticeable highs in recent years — last year saw the screening of *Lan Aish Fi Gilbab Abi* (I Shall not Live in my Father's Galabia) and *Nisf Rabie El-Akher* (Rabie's Other Half), this year's fare was rather tepid. *Marfou Mouaqatan Min Al-Khidma* (Temporarily Suspended from Service), starring Samir Ghaneim and Jihane Nasr, was an adaptation of *The Arabian Nights*, but very derivative. The Sultan Shahrayar becomes Abbas Yar and technological innovations are introduced. Yet, despite the role being played by the accomplished comedian Samir Ghanem, and despite the intended humour of embedding the generally colloquial dialogue with classical words, the serial failed to attract the following for which it had undoubtedly hoped.

Al-Qit Wal-Far (The Cat and the Mouse) was, if anything, more contrived: a supposed comedy that consisted entirely of *tableaux vivants* interspersed with commercial breaks. In this serial, writer Lenin El-Ramli created comic situations around two characters, the Mouse (Ahmed Rateb) and the Cat (Mamdouh Wafi). Unfortunately such anthropomorphism never really transcended the threadbare.

As in previous Ramadans, writer Ossama Anwar Okasha collaborated with director Ismail Abdel-Hafez on a serial, this year *Ahalina* (Our Families). The duo's past Ramadanic sallies had included several successes, not least *Layali Al-Hilmiya* (Hilmiya Nights), *Al-Shahd Wal-Dimou* (Honey and Tears) and *Arabesque*. While the halmark of such works was a refreshing dose of social criticism, *Ahalina* was a rather banal TV drama. The narrative line focused exclusively on Somaiya (played by Sabrine) who, despite her alienation from her family tries to help solve their problems. Interestingly, *Ahalina* bears a strong resemblance to *Rihlat Al-Sayed Abul-Ela Al-Bishri* (The Journey of Mr Abul-Ela Al-Bishri), another serial Okasha wrote a few years ago.

In the same genre of social drama were the two serials *Hayat El-Gohari* and *El-Hawi* (The Magician). The formula of such series depends largely on the pulling power of the leads, well-known cinema actors. In the former the title role is played by Youssra, who stars opposite Mustafa Fahmi, while the latter is a vehicle for Farouk El-Fishawi and Elham Shahine. Indeed, there is often little else to such serials beyond their acting as vehicles for their stars and when they attempt to incorporate elements of, say, social criticism they either resort to an empty rhetoric or fall flat on their face. Yet some do resort to strategies intended to lend them a spurious historical veracity. In *Hayat El-Gohari*, for example, the heroine is identified as the great grand daughter of El-Sheikh El-Gohari, who opposed Napoleon when the French general entered Al-Azhar Mosque on horse back. Quite what such distinguished ancestry contributes to the actual plot, though, remains unclear.

This year's religious serials, on the other hand, were generally distinguished. *Al-Qadaa fil-Islam* (Litigation in Islam), a staple for several years of seasonal programming, has the fault of relying heavily on the language of jurisprudence, which can make the programme heavy going. As to the serial *Haroun Al-Rashid*, it happily went beyond the skirt-chasing of the Abbassid Caliph (played by Nur El-Sherif) and brought out other aspects of his reign such as his tolerance for non-Arabs in an age of ethnocentricity. The mise-en-scene of religious serials remains, however, as kitsch as ever. If their costumes and decor attest to anything, it is to the designers' sloppy knowledge of the period in question.

No round-up of Ramadan TV would be complete without advertisments, not only because they take up a considerable portion of viewing time and sponsor several programmes but because the publicity of products acquires Ramadanic frills. In a month of banquets and gastronomic over-indulgence, it is no surprise to find stiff competition in advertisments of ghee. Those brands that contain no animal products, the advertisers claim, taste exactly like genuine *baladi* ghee — which, come to think of it, is quite reassuring.

Listings

EXHIBITIONS

Ramadaniat
Salama Gallery, 36/A Ahmed Orabi St, Mohandessin. Tel 346 3242. Daily 10am-2.30pm & 8pm-10pm. Until 8 Feb.
Works by Omar El-Nagdi, along with Mustafa Kamal, Ibrahim Abdel-Malek, Ivon Ezzat and Fares Ahmed Fares.

Zakaria El-Zeini (Paintings, drawings & graphics)
Mashrabiya Gallery, 8 Champollion St, Downtown. Tel 578 4494. Daily 11am-2.30pm & 7pm-11pm. Until 8 Feb.

Rose Hassanein (Collages & Paintings)
Cairo Opera Art Gallery, Opera House Grounds, Gezira. Tel 342 0589. Daily 10am-2pm & 7.30pm-10.30pm. Until 10 Feb.

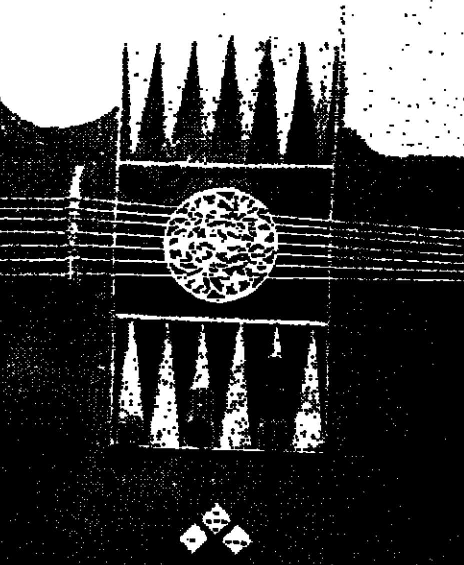
Awad El-Shimi (Engravings)
Italian Cultural Institute, 3 El-Sheikh El-Marsafi St, Zamalek. Tel 340 8791. Daily 10am-2.30pm. Until 15 Feb.
El-Shimi's engravings have genarally combined an orientalist fascination with exotica with the absence of human figures.

Group Show
Exhibition Hall, Cairo Meridien Hotel, Garden City. Tel 354 8382. Daily 10am-12am. Until 15 Feb.
Paintings, sculptures and engravings by 30 Egyptian artists.

Esmat Dawestashi (Paintings & Sculptures)
Gallery Hotel Sofitel, Hurghada. Tel 065/442 261. Daily until 16 Feb.
Dawestashi's witty assemblages, first exhibited at the Mashrabiya gallery in Cairo transfer, in part at least, to Hurghada.

Reda Abdel-Salam (Paintings)
Extra Gallery, 3 El-Nessim St, Zamalek. Tel 340 6293. Daily exc Sun, 10am-2pm & 6pm-10pm.

Sixth Cairo International Biennale
Akhenaten Centre of Arts, 1 El-Maahad El-Swissri St, Zamalek. Tel 340 8211. Daily exc Fri, 10am-1pm & 7pm-10pm. Cairo Opera Gallery, second floor, Opera House Grounds, Gezira. Tel 342 0592. Daily 10am-8pm. Until 15 March.
The Centre of Arts hosts works by artists from the US, Spain, Italy, Switzerland, the Netherlands, Palestine, South Africa, Morocco and Tunisia among others, in a show that has attracted mixed reactions from the critics. How far from the heritage can innovation go? A very long way, if the exhibits by Egyptian artists at this show are anything to go by.


Palestine at the Biennale

The Museum of Mr and Mrs Mohamed Mahmoud Khalil
1 Kafour El-Akhshid St, Dokki. Tel 336 2376. Daily exc Mon, 10am-6pm.
Egypt's largest collection of nineteenth century European art, amassed by the late Mahmoud Khalil and his wife, includes works by Courbet, Van Gogh, Gauguin, and Rodin and a host of impressionist works, housed in the villa once belonging to the Khalils and converted into a museum with little, if any, expense spared. There are also a number of excellent orientalist works.

Egyptian Museum
Tahrir Sq, Downtown. Tel 575 4319. Daily exc Fri, 8am-5pm; Fri 9am-11.15am & 1pm-3pm.
The world's largest collection of Pharaonic and Ptolemaic treasures, including massive granite statues and the smallest household objects used by the ancient Egyptians, along with, of course, the controversial mummies room. A perennial must.

Coptic Museum
Mar Girgis, Old Cairo. Tel 362 8766. Daily exc Fri, 9am-4pm; Fri 9am-11am & 1pm-3pm.
Founded in 1910, the museum houses a distinguished collection of Coptic art and artefacts, including textiles, manuscripts, icons and architectural features in a purpose built structure in the heart of the Coptic city.

Islamic Museum
Port Said St, Ahmed Maher St, Bab El-Khalq. Tel 390 9930/ 390 1520. Daily exc Fri, 9am-4pm; Fri 9am-11.30am & 2pm-4pm.
A vast collection of Islamic arts and crafts including *mashrabiya*, lustreware ceramics, textiles, woodwork, coins and manuscripts drawn from Egypt's Fatimid, Ayyubid and Mameluke periods and from other countries in the Islamic world.

Museum of Modern Egyptian Art
Opera House Grounds, Gezira. Tel 340 6861. Daily exc Mon, 10am-1pm & 5pm-9pm.
A permanent display of paintings and sculpture charting the modern art movement in Egypt from its earliest pioneers to latest practitioners. A state of the art museum housing the contemporary art of the state.

Mohamed Nagui Museum
Château Pyramids, 9 Mahmoud Al-Guindi St, Giza.
A museum devoted to the paintings of Mohamed Nagui (1888-1956), the Alexandrian aristocrat who is considered one of the pioneers of the modern Egyptian art movement.

Mahmoud Mukhtar Museum
Tahrir St, Gezira. Daily exc Sun and Mon, 9am-1.30pm.
A permanent collection of works by the sculptor Mahmoud Mukhtar (d. 1934), whose granite monument to Saad Zaghloul stands near Qasr El-Nil Bridge, and whose Egypt Awakening became, somewhat belatedly, an icon of post revolutionary Egypt.

FILMS

Blow Up
Italian Cultural Institute, 3 El-Sheikh El-Marsafi St, Zamalek. Tel 340 8791. 9 Feb, 8pm.
Directed by Michaelangelo Antonioni (1967), starring D Hemmings.

Commercial cinemas change their programmes every Monday. The information provided is valid through to Sunday after which it is wise to check with the cinemas. Arabic films are seldom subtitled. For information, contact the venue.

El-Jentel (The Gentleman)
Rivoli I, 26 July St, Downtown. Tel 575 5053. Daily 1pm, 9.30pm & midnight. Roxy, Roxy Sq, Heliopolis. Tel 258 0344. Daily 10am, 1pm & 9pm.
Mahmoud Abdel-Aziz, Poussi and Elham Shahin play it for laughs.

Nazwa (The Fling)
Rivoli II, 26th July St, Downtown. Tel 575 5053. Daily 1pm, 8pm & 10pm.
The Egyptian version of *Fatal Attraction* with Ahmed Zaki, Youssra and Sherine Reda.

Dragon Heart
Metro, 35 Talaat Harb St, Downtown. Tel 393 3897. Daily 10am, 1pm & 9pm.

Duston Checks In
Tiba I, Nasr City. Tel 262 9407. Daily 10.30am, 3pm & 9.30pm.

The Jungle Book
El-Horreya I, El-Horreya Mall, Roxy, Heliopolis. Daily 10.45am, 1pm, 8.30pm & 10.30pm. Ramsis Hilton II, Corniche El-Nil St. Tel 574 7436. Daily 10.45am, 1pm, 8.30pm & 10.30pm.

The Nutty Professor
Ramsis Hilton I, Corniche El-Nil St. Tel 574 7436. Daily 10.30pm & midnight. El-Horreya II, El-Horreya Mall, Roxy, Heliopolis. Daily 10pm & midnight.
Eddie Murphy, thanks to a chemical experiment, confuses the scales.

Jingle All the Way
Radio, 24 Talaat Harb St, Downtown. Tel 575 6562. Daily 10am, 1pm & 9pm. Normandy, 31 El-Ahram St, Heliopolis. Tel 258 0254. Daily 12.30pm, 6.30pm & 9.30pm.
Arnold Schwarznegger in yet another film for the kiddiwinks.

Courage Under Fire
El-Salam, 65 Abdel-Hamid Badawi St, Heliopolis. Tel 293 1072. Daily 3.30pm, 6.30pm & 9.30pm.

A Goofy Movie
Ramsis Hilton I, Corniche El-Nil St. Tel 574 7436. Daily 10.45am, 1pm & 8.30pm. Tahrir, 112 Tahrir St, Dokki. Tel 335 5726. Daily 2pm & 8.30pm. El-Horreya II, El-Horreya Mall, Roxy, Heliopolis. Daily 10.45am, 1pm, & 8.45pm.

Mini Film Festival
Tahrir, 112 Tahrir St, Dokki. Tel 335 5726. 10pm & midnight.
Thur: **Casino**. Starring Robert De Niro, Sharon Stone and Joe Pesci.
Fri: **Mission Impossible**. Tom Cruise stars in this technically sophisticated version of the old television series which leaves little more than the soundtrack unchanged.
Sat: **12 Monkeys**. Science fiction drama starring Brad Pitt.

Starting the Eid El-Fetr, on Sunday 9 Feb, new Egyptian feature releases will occupy the film theatres listed below. For the programme before Sunday, consult the schedule above.

Bekhit We Adila II (Bekhit And Adila II)
Rivoli I, 26 July St, Downtown. Tel 575 5053. Daily 1pm, 3.30pm, 6.30pm & 9.30pm. Roxy, Roxy Sq, Heliopolis. Tel 258 0344. Daily 10am, 3pm, 6pm & 9pm. Tahrir, 112 Tahrir St, Dokki. Tel 335 5726. Daily 3pm, 6pm & 9pm. MGM, Kolleyat El-Nasr Sq, Maadi. Tel 352 3066. Daily 10am, 1pm, 3pm, 6pm & 9pm. Metro, 35 Talaat Harb St, Downtown. Tel 393 3897. Daily 10am, 1pm, 3pm, 6pm & 9pm. El-Haram, El-Haram St, Giza. Tel 385 8358. Daily 10am, 1pm, 3pm, 6pm & 9pm.
Starring Adel Imam and Sherine.

Imra'a Fawq El-Qemma (A Woman At The Top)
Normandy, 31 El-Ahram St, Heliopolis. Tel 258 0254. Daily 12.30pm, 3.30pm, 6.30pm & 9.30pm. Rivoli II, 26 July St, Downtown. Tel 575 5053. Daily 1pm, 3.30pm, 6.30pm 8pm & 10pm.
With Nadia El-Guindi.

DANCE

Nubian Folkloric Troupe
Maulana Abul-Kalam Azad Centre for Indian Culture, 23 Talaat Harb St, Downtown. Tel 393 3396. 6 Feb, 9.30pm.
Conducted by Hassan El-Sissy.

MUSIC

Arabic Music Ensemble
Gomhouriya Theatre, Gomhouriya St. Tel 391 9956. 6 Feb, 8pm.
Conducted by Salah Ghobashi.

Melodies Ensemble
Gomhouriya Theatre, Gomhouriya St. Tel 391 9956. 8 Feb, 8pm.

LECTURES

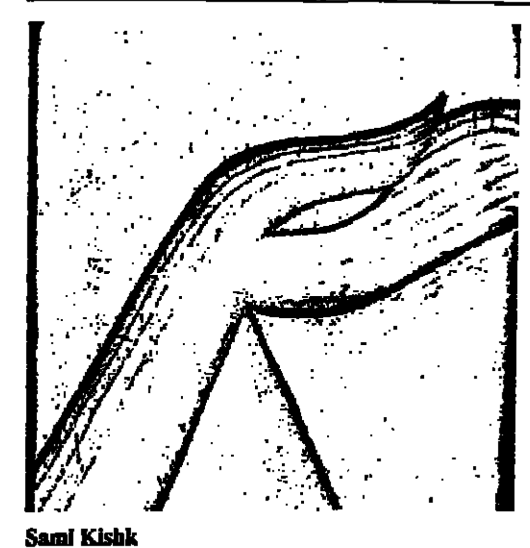
Recent Investigations in the Valley of the Kings in Luxor
British Council, 192 El-Nil St, Agouza. Tel 301 0319. 10 Feb, 7pm.
Lecture by Edwin Brook, former director of the Canadian Institute in Cairo.

All information correct at time of going to press. However, it remains wise to check with venues first, since programmes, dates and times are subject to change at very short notice.

Please telephone or send information to Listings, *Al-Ahram Weekly*, Galaa St, Cairo. Tel 5786064. Fax 5786089/833.

Compiled by **Inly El-Kashef**

Around the galleries


Sami Kishk

ISLAMIC motifs and designs feature in an exhibition of paintings, ceramics, drawings and sculptures by 16 artists currently on show in the foyer of the main **Al-Ahram Building** on El-Galaa Street. These include, among others, paintings inspired by Islamic architecture, calligraphy and arabesques by **Yehia Abdu, Attiya Mustafa** and **Hassan Ghoneim** and ceramics by **Samir El-Guindy**.

The Atelier du Caire hosts paintings, 30 in all, by **Halim Habashi**. Though some of these are academic in their attention to detail, most have as their subject mysterious, almost empty landscapes bordering on the surreal.

The Opera House Gallery exhibits works executed in wood by **Sami Kishk**. They involve an assembly of different pieces of wood, selected for the quality of the grain.

Reviewed by **Nagwa El-Ashri**

With "The Other Country" Ibrahim Abdel-Meguid feels he has arrived. The award-winning novelist on the genesis of the work, and below we publish an extract and a critical assessment of the novel

Once upon an *Eid*



Today I was not awoken by my mother, nor were there the usual background sounds, the radio, *Allahu Akbar*, the noise of the children in the street, the morning songs celebrating the *Eid*.

Today my married sister with her two sons will not come to visit, nor will my divorced sister and her two daughters come. My mischievous younger sister, still a university student, will not insist on sitting next to me, and my brother, also a university student, will not look embarrassed about being both an adult and dependent on the money I give him.

Anyone in my place today might have cried, finding himself alone in a big house, having his breakfast alone on the first day of the *Eid*. I turned the volume of the radio up as loud as possible and smiled.

It has been years now since I stopped going to the *Eid* prayers. True, I got up early today and busied myself preparing breakfast: boiled meat, soup with cardamom and *fattah*, though there is nobody to share the meal with me.

I remember a row erupting from God knows where. My father had just returned from prayer and my mother was just about to finish preparing our hot breakfast, and nobody could tell the reason behind the row.

But many other voices were raised, in the flats on the same floor, those above, and those below. The voices of men intermingled with voices of women, with the weeping of children and with our own fear. But then my father backtracked: "Forgive me *Umm* Ismail. Many happy returns of the *Eid*." Everyone fell quiet. Silence reigned over everything. Then laughter echoed through every flat in the building, and the doors were thrown open to let joy in. Why did all this happen then, and why does it not happen anymore? I do not really know. Maybe because all the children in all those flats grew up like I did. Maybe because all the fathers died, as my father did. Maybe because all the mothers fell ill, like my mother. Maybe the mothers are dead by now... Oh God! Is it possible that my mother would die while I am here? I went on eating with great appetite, indifferent to the memories and dark thoughts.

*****

I went out into the street. I do not need the car today. I shall walk to see if the city is truly empty. I cannot spend the *Eid* alone in the house.

All the rich people here travel during the *Eid* either to the Levant or Europe.

All the poor travel to Egypt.

Women and children are glued to their TV sets and the video.

Foreigners go on pilgrimage.

Non-Muslim foreigners do not leave their houses.

My God...Can all this be really true?

I walked on.

There are low buildings overlooking the dusty roads that lead to the main street. I can see nobody except a few white goats jumping around cars parked opposite houses with closed doors and windows. And I walk on.

Suddenly a door opens. A man and a woman clad in black walk out of the door and with the children they enter a huge car. I hear the sound of their speech but understand nothing. The car moves away slowly and disappears. And I walk on.

I reach the main road. There is no market today. All the shops are closed. They remind me of the closed shops of Mex Street in Alexandria at night.

The street is littered with paper and on both sides of the pavement are empty cardboard boxes, while empty cans of fizzy drink are everywhere. The weather is fine, and the open sky looks marvelous. I read the signs. Here is a watch dealer, there perfumes, then a bookshop, a grocery, a jeweller, a cassette shop, another for electric appliances. There is Al-Rajehi Bank where I once saw Mansour angry. Opposite is Al-Riyadh Bank, behind the vegetable market which is closed today.

The street is not as long as I had believed it to be. Here am I counting lampposts, discovering a hundred of them on one side of the street. That means there are two hundred of them in total and I can save myself the bother of counting those on the other side. I am almost finished with the street. I approach desolate plots of land, houses being demolished, others under construction. I can also see huge cats, like tigers or sheep, gathering around something I cannot see in the ruins but which must be edible. The sun is now ascending higher in the sky and the horizon is looming larger.

How marvelous it is to watch the horizon as it opens up when you are in the midst of a crowd. How miserable it is to be alone with an open horizon in a distant country on the day of the *Eid*. Me and my horizon... what misery! Here they do not kill cats. They say the Prophet gave his blessing to cats. As for dogs, that is another story... they cannot be saved.

Oh God, where did it come from, this huge white dog roaming the street, looking like a lost donkey? It is not even looking around. It is the same size as the dog I once saw in the desert. Maybe it is the same dog I saw lost in the desert, and maybe some one has told it that today the town will itself be a desert. It pauses and looks at me. I wave to it, pointing to the cats, inciting it to attack them. But it turns its head, and walks away slowly. I walk on until I reach the mosque at the end of the street. I find it open but empty. Opposite is the pickle shop which today is closed.

The extract above is from Al-Balda Al-Ukhra *(The Other Country), the novel for which Ibrahim Abdel-Meguid won the Naguib Mahfouz Medal. By the end of this year a translation of the novel into English is to be published jointly by AUC Press, sponsors of the award, and Doubleday*

Illustration: Gamil Shafik

Patterns of writing

Ibrahim Abdel-Meguid on the genesis of "The Other Country", the novel which has, he writes, marked his breakthrough to a wider public

My novel *Al-Balda Al-Ukhra* (The Other Country) has always had a way of reasserting itself. After writing it, I wrote the novella *Qanadil Al-Bahr* (Jellyfish) and *La Ahad Yanam Fil-Iskandariya* (No-one Sleeps in Alexandria) both of which attracted some notice, but "The Other Country" resurfaced, taking me by surprise.

In writing it the same pattern emerged: I had decided to start working on it in 1985, but the day I sat down to it I found myself writing *Bait Al-Yasmine* (House of Jasmines). So the writing of "The Other Country" was postponed by a year, eventually being written between 1986 and '88.

The only problem that faced me in writing "The Other Country" was the need for self-control, by which I mean the need to avoid the temptations of irony and superiority. The material was rich, requiring as much to be edited out as included. I did my best to write impartially, keeping at bay, as far as possible, my own political persuasions. In any case, the desert, to me, has always spoken of the frailty, the weakness of human beings, or such has been my perception of the desert in Egypt and in Asia.

I experienced the emptiness of the desert when, as a child, I accompanied my father who worked for the railways. The very air seemed defeated by the light, and I knew even then that the emptiness was there to stay. The presence of other people in the desert always makes me think of the Fall, of total desolation.

On my own trip, I had taken these impressions of the desert with me, telling myself that they would help me bear up, there, in "the other country". But, combined with emptiness, with nothingness, it overpowered me. It almost broke my spirit. I returned very quickly. My experience lasted for exactly 11 months, as did the experience of Ismail Khidr Moussa, the protagonist of "The Other Country". At first I decided I would give the protagonist the name Ali, the name I gave the boy-hero in my earlier novel, *Al-Massafat* (Distances), and the only name in *Al-Sayad Wal-Yamam* (The Hunter and the Turtle-Doves). But the name that appeared on paper was Ismail.

Ismail, who has decided to experience a new country like a mirror over the surface of which events slide, finds himself both object and subject. His sense of alienation both at home and in the other country is typical of a whole generation — mine — the generation of 1967. Ismail fluctuates and dithers; things slip between his fingers. Throughout the process of writing, I had this sense of sweet melancholy, if I may so refer to it.

I also grew very fond of the character called Nabil — the simple Egyptian who does not know how to handle his relationships with his fiancée and his mother and who is frightened that the satellite dish will land on his head. I felt the same affection towards the Asian characters whose originals were very vivid in my memory, despite the fact that more than eight years had elapsed between my return from the other country and the writing of the novel. Writing about Arshad, the Pakistani, I could almost see the melancholy in his eyes. As for the Palestinian, Murshid, he would breeze in and out of my room. Aida and Rosemary took turns sitting on the chair in the corner and I could almost smell their perfume as I wrote.

It was only after the novel was published that I realised it was good. I had re-written it three times before publication. When I read it in book form, I discovered the novel was full of patches of light: the story of the Egyptian who leaves early one morning in the thirties to walk all the way to Al-Medina, the dreams and nightmares, the insomnia... The chapters have within them a kind of illumination similar to impressionist paintings, though they do replicate, in their conjunction, something akin to a classical form. Yet it did not bother me much whether the narrative structure was classical or modernist. I knew I was addressing the reader on a level far more intimate than that generally allowed by any stylistic convention.

And may be this is the reason why the novel has insistently resurfaced, for perhaps it is a work capable of self-rejuvenation. Be this as it may, the fact is that it is this novel that has granted me access to the general reader. In Arabic, 15,000 copies of it have been printed, and the French translation sold out within six months. I therefore feel — understandably, I think — a little biased towards "The Other Country".

Broken promises

As stimulating as it is insightful: **Ibrahim Fathi** assesses Ibrahim Abdel-Meguid's prize-winning novel, *"The Other Country"*

Ibrahim Abdel-Meguid's treatment of the theme of the migration of Egyptian workers to petro-dollar countries in *Al-Balda Al-Ukhra* ("The Other Country") is rich in symbolism. The novel explores the imprint of this collective experience on both those who undertake the journey as well as on those who remain.

The journey charted by Abdel-Meguid could not be more different from the journeys witnessed in those narratives, written several decades ago, by Tewfik El-Hakim and Lewis Awad. Theirs were individual experiences of "Western civilisation" and its intellectual, political and artistic influence, seen through the dazzled eyes of writers from Egypt's intellectual elite. The protagonist of "The Other Country", on the other hand, represents a social trend in countries of the South where millions are mercilessly driven out by the centrifugal action of poverty, unemployment and dictatorial regimes. They migrate to petro-dollar countries, which appear to hold out the promise of moving up the economic and social ladder. "The other country" holds particular promise for those who live in distant villages in Egypt, Pakistan, India and so on.

But "The Other Country" is not a sociological investigation of the problems attendant on migration from the South. The novel transcends local issues to delineate the ugly face of a hegemony that crushes individual dreams of fulfilment. Against this broad canvas the novel also depicts doomed attempts at resistance and rebellion, be they in the personal or public spheres. The narrative thus combines both overview and close up, linking the public with the personal.

It is only natural that a novel about estrangement should also detail the gap between desire and fulfilment, between expectation and actuality. As critics have already noted, the journey to "the other country" shares some aspects with the journey to prison, to the inferno, to the very "heart of darkness". It is a journey to an order of oppression, a world of masters, slaves and outcasts, from which there can be no escape. As such, the world he charts is in stark contrast to the Western cities of light and freedom as they are seen in El-Hakim and Awad's respective journeys.

"Western civilisation", though, is by no means absent from Abdel-Meguid's air-conditioned oriental inferno. The world of the North is represented in the novel by an American businessman and his wife, accomplices in deception and fraud. They undertake a string of schemes and projects in close association with local contacts. The novel therefore deconstructs the image of the west as harbinger of enlightenment and freedom.

Like Kafka's protagonist vis-à-vis the castle, Abdel-Meguid's protagonist stands at the gateway of "the other country" bemused by the dehumanised society he is about to enter. He believes he is under contract to carry out a specific job in a certain village. But the job turns into a trap for he has no rights, no guarantees, no responsibilities. From the outset, the most basic certitudes, like an individual's rights and his entitlement to fair treatment, are lost. On arrival at an airport in the other country the hero stands in a line, bent and with his bottom bare, a posture he is forced to adopt so that it can be determined whether or not he is carrying any contagious diseases into the promised land.

After arriving, he is drawn into a microcosmic experience of America as the American businessman and his local partner lure him into their snare, the bait being the sexual favours of the woman supposed to be the former's wife. Lured into their shady world, he becomes an accessory to their dubious practices, and is left, finally, shouldering the full responsibility — the fate accorded to scapegoats.

Yet Abdel-Meguid's protagonist differs from Kafka's in that he is not a passive spectator. He refuses to fall into the trap and tries to expose the "hi-tech" schemes of the American. Difficult as it is to pit himself against a mechanism that would have him reduced to a mere cog in a colossal machine, incapable of understanding it, the protagonist struggles to awaken from the nightmare and find a way out.

As to the relationship between "the other country" and "the original country" — Egypt — it is not one of contrast and opposition. Rather, Abdel-Meguid brings out the parallelism and mutual influence in the duality, using the narrator as the vehicle.

Though Abdel-Meguid draws on some of his own experiences in portraying the protagonist, the text cannot be read as a fictionalised autobiography. True the narrator, like the author, had his consciousness formed in the seventies' students movement which called for democracy and which reached its culmination — and ultimately its end — in the bread riots of 1977. A budding writer, the narrator faces many obstacles in realising his talents. Gone are the years of collective work; instead selfishness and the search for gain through emigration, or else by acting as a middleman, have become the order of the day. As disparities between members of the same family emerge, ties of kinship weaken. In his mother land, cornered as he is by both work and family relations, the narrator feels claustrophobic, almost exiled on his home turf. His responses are out of sync with emergent social patterns and consequently he experiences a sense of loss and alienation.

The novel, then, is far from being an invective against the other country and an ode to the original one. Nor does it set itself the task of analysing social and political relations in both countries. What the novel seeks to chart is a genera condition, namely alienation, delving into a certain state of being, that of refusal to adapt to a context that suffocates the individual's capacities and potential. The narrator, despite all the circumstances that surround him in his own country, is motivated from within to reassert his own values in the face of a world noticeably lacking values. Throughout his journey to the other country, he eludes its snares and survives its ordeals by embarking on an internal odyssey.

The narrative structure, therefore, is that of a quest. The trope of the journey is the dominant one: it is a journey towards self-realisation through discovering the conditions of human existence in today's world. The narrator's decision to return to his homeland does not imply reconciliation but a continuation of the quest in the light of new-found experience and the knowledge he has acquired about the powers that rule "the castle", be they the democracies of the First World or the dictatorships of the Third World.

Fragments and episodes without continuity, the novel demonstrates rather than tells, suggests rather than explains. The life-lines of the characters are neither cumulative nor climactic. Rather, their experiences are seen as in a serial, free of any governing pattern. There are certain narrative threads, at times running parallel, at others overlapping. There is the story of a girl in "the other country" whose dreams of romance and creativity are cruelly smashed. There is the story of the Pakistani activist whose fight against dictatorship comes to naught. There is the story of the eccentric who throws a mock banquet to which he invites a dignitary in order to poke fun at the powers that be. There are the tales of the young men to whom freedom is synonymous with aggression, with watching porno films and concocting pernicious charges against the narrator and his friends in a thoroughly conservative society. These many episodes and stories are variations — often ironic — on the conflict between contradictory situations and values that is of the essence of this novel.

Abdel-Meguid's "The Other Country" is as stimulating as it is insightful.

Plain Talk

Edward Lane's *Manners and Customs of the Modern Egyptians* has become a regular companion of mine. Whenever there is an occasion, be it feast, wedding or folkloric recital, I always pick it up to find out the origins of the event. And Lane never failed to come up with the right answers. The more one reads the book, with its minute details of life in Egypt in the 19th century, the more one comes to realise the magnitude of the task that the author had set himself.

I had the pleasure of writing the introduction to the book, not as I tell my friends, during the lifetime of Lane, but for the 1955 Everyman edition of the book. That was my first introduction to this ever green reference to Egypt at a historic moment, when it was on the threshold of a new era, the transfer from a medieval country to a modern one. There are few books on 19th century Egypt that can be regarded as classics. This book is one of them.

Modern Egypt has, unfortunately, suffered greatly from two types of books: the ones written by hasty travellers who do not bother to record more than what is seen in the bazaars, the other by the well-meaning European once in the service of the Egyptian administration who assumes a patronising attitude. It would be difficult to say which of the two has done Egypt more harm. Certainly neither of them has done her justice. Egypt needs explaining, not defending.

Of course, in recent times quite a number of books have been written and published about Egypt which qualify for this description, like Robin Fedden's book *Egypt, The Land of The Valley* and Desmond Stewart's *Cairo, Mother of The World*; but Lane's book has remained, from the time of its publication until now, a unique contribution to any library on Egypt.

Lane's book is an essay in objective social research and, by any measure, it is an example of what modern sociologists endeavour to achieve. The author, in modern sociological jargon was "a participant observer". In many ways his approach would have satisfied the most up-to-date ideas of social research.

The book covered a period of the greatest importance in the life of modern Egypt, a period which was, from almost every viewpoint, the dawn of a new civilisation. The period was, in fact, a watershed in the history of Egypt; so much was changing and so much was new.

Except in a few minor instances, the superficial veneer of Turkish influence did not mislead Lane. He went deeper and unearthed, as it were, the basic traits of Egyptian life. That is why much of what he wrote is still true today and forces the present day reader to the realisation that Egyptian traditions are much more deep-rooted than is generally assumed.

Take, for instance, Lane's description of the way Egyptians celebrated Ramadan. In fact, this is what has led me to write about Lane's book. Whenever Ramadan, or any other religious or festive event arrives, I refer to Lane and try to fathom what used to happen then and what is happening now. Lane gives a detailed description of what went on then: describing *Leylaet el-ro'ya* (the night of the observation of the new moon) and all the celebrations that followed. He describes how during the day the Egyptians are "generally speaking, very morose: in the night after breakfast they are unusually affable and cheerful".

His description of visiting the tombs is uncanny. Every detail is there; the palm branches, the *shureyks*, the dates and bread, the fruits taken by the families of the dead and distributed to the poor, the Qur'an reciters of *Suret Yassin*.

The modern Egyptian may laugh at some of Lane's writings, and some of the manners and customs might have died out, but he has only to go a few miles outside Cairo into any village to see these same habits still observed. Whether in wedding or death the same ceremonies are enacted in the countryside. In many villages the wandering story-teller, described by Lane, reciting the adventure of Abu Zeid El-Hilali, is still one of the chief sources of entertainment. Of course, he cannot compete with the new media, but he still has his place especially during the *mawalid*, also beautifully described by Lane.

There is no doubt that *Manners and Customs of The Modern Egyptians* provides us with a most valuable record of Egypt's culture, songs and legends, its folklore and superstitions — in short, of all that is part and parcel of the Egyptian heritage.

Mursi Saad El-Din



photo: Khaled El-Fiqi

Marking the end of Ramadan, Cairenes take to the streets in celebration. Fayza Hassan **looks back at *Eids* gone by: cakes, new clothes and visits to the cemetery**

Other feasts

Egyptian popular festivals and *mawalid* have always fascinated travellers, who have marvelled endlessly at the richness of the traditions. The *eids* (*El-Eid El-Kabir*, the feast of the sacrifice, and *El-Eid El-Saghir*, marking the end of Ramadan), the celebrations marking the birth of the prophet, the cutting of the dam *(Wafa' El-Nil)*, the processions accompanying the departure and the return of the pilgrims: all were occasions on which the people, decked out in their best clothes, came out on the streets to rejoice and make merry.

Without any doubt, the cutting of the dam surpassed any other festival in pomp and magnificence but, especially since the Fatimid era, all feasts were celebrated with a great flurry of activities, an abundance of food and a public holiday. "Al-Mo'izz set the sumptuous tone which was to characterise the whole Fatimid period, whose first century was probably the period of greatest Egyptian prosperity since the pharaohs," writes Desmond Steward in *Cairo, Mother of the World* (The American University in Cairo Press, 1996). In *Manners and Customs of the Modern Egyptians*, E W Lane describes the various festivals in great detail and, while the cutting of the dam and the ceremonies of the *mahmal* are things of the past now, other celebrations have changed little. Lane could have rewritten word for word, in 1996, the description of *Eid El-Fitr* he wrote in 1830.

Karima, a young woman who lives in the Cairo working class suburb of Bassatin, describes the *Eid* in her neighbourhood: "In the last days of Ramadan, the shopkeepers increase their stock of toys and children's clothes, because in our area the *Eid* is mainly for the children. Mothers buy toys and new clothes and shoes in preparation for the big day. There are also swings set up in our street for the children who are not taken to the gardens because their mothers and sisters are busy with the guests or the family is too poor to pay for transportation. With these swings the children don't feel deprived.

"Sometimes the *aragoz* comes by and gives a performance but this happens less and less these days. Sometimes when the family's dead have been buried in Cairo, the men and the older women go to the *qarafa* (cemetery) with baskets full of *fetir*, *kahk* and bread, but not many do nowadays. They are too busy. Many have to buy the *kahk* because the women work and have no time for baking.

"My father is buried in the country, we have nobody in the *qarafa* here. Sometimes my brother travels to visit the dead in our village, but not every year".

"In our house we are all grown-ups so we buy new clothes for my sister's children. If we have enough money, we buy material and have new slipcovers made for the chairs of our sitting room. On the *Wa'fa* (the eve of the *Eid*) we clean the house thoroughly and my mother cooks for the guests. She makes her own *kahks* and the children take the trays to the baker, and she also prepares a morning meal which includes meat.

"On the first day of the feast, my uncles (mother's brothers) come and visit. Usually they stay for breakfast. Some girls go out with their fiancés, but I don't. Men are embarrassed when women joke and laugh and the *Eid* is a time where one should be carefree. I have more fun with my girlfriends. We all wear our best clothes, something new if possible.

"I always manage to have something new, usually shoes or a blouse, both if I can afford it. We go together to an amusement park, the Fish Gardens or the Zoo. When we come back we buy chickpeas and sweet potatoes or *tirmis* from the peddlers who stop their carts in our street during the feast. When I was little I used to also buy paper hats and whistles. Now I buy them for my sister's children."

Ibrahim, who spent his childhood in Damietta, remembers that, apart from the new clothes, an important feature of the *Eid* was the *'edeya*, a present of a few piastres given by the men of the family to the children. The amount of the *'edeya* received indicated the status of the donor and it was customary that the parents of the recipients gave the donor's children an amount equal or superior on the next *Eid*, so "a sort of account was kept". The amounts were discussed by the close members of the family, someone remarking that so-and-so gave too little, and whether it should be considered a slight, or just an indication of stinginess, while so-and-so gave more this year and one should remember to return the favour, and more, on the following *Eid*.

"The men of the family," says Ibrahim, "having completed the morning prayers, would go to visit the *qarafa*, to pray and distribute the *rahma* (usually loaves of bread baked with ghee or sugar or both) to the caretakers and to the poor — who would go there expecting gifts of food and sometimes money — returning late in the morning. The children would be awake and dressed in their best clothes, awaiting the father's return. On his arrival, every child would kiss the father's hand. The children would then gather and go to the place where the swings and merry-go-round were set up — the old cemetery in my village; when the cemetery was moved to new grounds the swings continued to be erected in the same place — or take a ride across town on one of the donkey carts decorated for the occasion. The latter activity was a chance for many children to visit their village — including spots which they were not normally able to reach on foot — or attend a representation of the *aragoz*. They would return only when all their money was spent."

Many women would spend the last ten days of Ramadan preparing the *kahks*, but not all women did. Those who could afford it would hire a *kahk*-maker, who would come to the house a couple of days before the feast and prepare all the sweets.

In Damietta, says Ibrahim, it was an indication of the family's wealth if they were able to hire someone to make the *kahks* for them. In Cairo, writes Gérard Viaud in *Le Secret des Mystérieuses Rues du Caire* ("The Secret of the Mysterious Streets of Cairo"), in the quarter of El-Ghouriyya, there is a street called El-Kahkiyyin (the *kahk*-makers). The shops there specialised in the confection of *kahks*, but, comments Viaud, their *kahks* were only popular at Christmas, Easter and other such occasions, when customers bought large boxes to give as presents — not on *Eid El-Fitr* (also known as *El-Eid El-Saghir*, the feast celebrating the end of Ramadan).

For this festival, most housewives took pride in making their *kahks* at home, each with her secret recipe, or sometimes working in teams, going to each other's houses so that by *Eid* everyone had a supply of *kahks*. A few days before the end of the fast, one could observe, from morning to dusk, the long lines of children carrying trays on their heads, waiting to consign their uncooked *kahks* and biscuits to the bakery of the quarter, to be placed in the oven. In the late evening they would come back to collect their cakes, baked to perfection by a professional.

The *kahkiyyin* were kept busy during the other festivals, but had fewer orders during the *Eid*. One year, recounts Viaud, a *kahk*-maker thought of increasing his sales during the festive season by advertising that a pearl was hidden in one of his *kahks*. Women who heard the story — and many did — forgot tradition and hurried to buy vast quantities, but the pearl was never found. The *kahk*-maker, however, made more money on that particular *Eid* than during the rest of the year.

Lane's description of *El-Eid El-Saghir* does not differ considerably from accounts of today's celebrations of the event.

"On the first three days of Shawwal (the tenth month, the next after Ramadan) is celebrated the minor of the two grand festivals, which are ordained by the religion of the Muslims to be observed with great rejoicing... The expiration of the fast of Ramadan is the occasion of this festival. Soon after sunrise on the first day, the people having dressed in new or their best clothes, the men assemble in the mosques and perform the prayers of two *rak'ahs*, a *sunneh* ordinance of the *'eed* after which the *khateeb* delivers an exhortation... Friends meeting in the mosque or in the street, or in each other's houses, congratulate and embrace and kiss each other. They generally visit each other for this purpose. Some, even of the lower classes, dress themselves entirely in a new suit of clothes; and almost everyone wears something new, if it be only a pair of shoes. The servant is presented with one or more articles of clothing by the master, and receives a few piasters from each of his master's friends if they visit the house, or even goes to those friends to congratulate them, and receives his present. If he have served a former master, he also visits him, and is in like manner rewarded for his trouble; and sometimes he brings a present of a dish of *kahk* (or sweet cakes) and obtains in return money of twice the value or more.

"On the day of this *'eed*, most of the people of Cairo eat *feseekh* (or salted fish) and *kahks*, *fateereh* (or thin, folded pancake) and *shureyks* (a kind of bun). Some families also prepare a dish called *mumezzezeh* consisting of stewed meat, with onions, and a quantity of treacle, vinegar and coarse flour, and the master usually procures dried fruits (*nukl*) such as nuts, raisins, etc. for his family. Most of the shops in the metropolis are closed, excepting those at which eatables and sherbet are sold; but the streets present a gay appearance from the crowds of passengers in their holiday clothes."

Feeding on the past

During Ramadan, El-Warsha theatre troupe previewed its latest work. Rania Khallaf finds a seat in the audience



photo: Sherif Sonbol

Story-teller, singer and musician Sayed El-Dawwi warms up his instrument outside the tent where El-Warsha theatre troupe will perform. When he starts singing, a crowd gathers and sings along. This impromptu gathering is part of the show. El-Dawwi then moves inside and takes his seat in the row of chairs where the other members of El-Warsha sit. By now the crowd is too large to fit inside the tent and people listen from outside.

This Ramadan, El-Warsha previewed its latest work, *El-Sira El-Hilaliya* (Story of the Hilaliya Clan). The epic, which is well known to audiences from Tunis to Tehran, tells the tale of the heroic warrior Abu Zeid El-Hilali and his tribe. For centuries, it has been popular entertainment at market places, coffee houses, weddings and *mawalid*.

"Ramadan is a good time to perform because everybody goes out. There is a demand for entertainment," said the group's founder and director, Hassan El-Gereitli.

El-Warsha theatre troupe, whose name means 'the workshop', was founded in 1987. Its first performance was *Dayer, Dayer*, an Arabised version of Alfred Jarry's *Round and Round It Goes*. The group then began to look for inspiration closer to home. They toured the country learning and gathering material. Among the arts they studied were story-telling, singing, shadow puppet theatre, stick and dervish dancing. Their 1993 performance *Ghazir El-Leil*, or "Tide of Night", which re-told the popular folk ballad of lovers Hassan and Nai'ma, was warmly received by audiences.

The epic *El-Sira El-Hilaliya* is believed to be over a million lines, according to El-Gereitli. The group's research for the performance was extensive, recalled the director: "We recorded, video taped and worked with the masters of story-telling both in Upper and Lower Egypt." He mentioned collaboration with the famed Ali El-Wehedi in Mansoura and Bakatoush in Kafr El-Sheikh.

This Ramadan, *El-Sira El-Hilaliya* was also produced by state television. The television series drifts away from the essence of the story, claims El-Gereitli: "Traditions are not some sort of decoration or exotic element. We digest the essence of the epic completely in the process of acting." The group uses few props and costumes in their performances. Character relations evolve with new actors, explains the director, and the experience is different each time.

Among El-Warsha's dedicated fans is Humphry Davis of the Ford Foundation: "The first time I heard *El-Sira El-Hilaliya* was on the radio in the late 1970s. Poet Abdel-Rahman El-Abnoudi recited it. When I heard about El-Warsha's work exploring traditional folklore, I was excited. The most wonderful thing about the troupe is that they take a long time researching. I respect that, and I think it shows a great deal of integrity."

El-Gereitli studied theatre in Switzerland and England before returning to Egypt to devote himself to the revival of popular arts. He does not consider El-Warsha's work traditional theatre. "We are basically about creating a kind of contemporary theatre — not just folklore pieces." He added that theatre is "a chance to discover ourselves through our encounters with audiences."

On his travels through Upper Egypt El-Gereitli said he was dismayed to find that story-telling is a dying art. The director speaks of artists' responsibility to keep traditional arts alive. Part of his role in the group is training younger generations to carry on the traditions of their elders. Many perform with the group.

"The essence of traditional story-telling could survive if successfully married to contemporary theatre. The future feeds on the past. Likewise, traditional arts feed the artistic process," El-Gereitli said. Poets like Ali Garamon and Mohamed El-Yamani have contributed to the revival of traditional story-telling. Yet, El-Gereitli sees a need for developing the technique further .

For now, El-Warsha remains on the fringe of mainstream contemporary theatre. Foreign cultural centres and the Cultural Development Fund are their main financial supporters. "Since we are not an official troupe, we do not have a stable source of income. Every member of the troupe has his own job," explained Khaled El-Guweili, the troupe's scriptwriter. But, he added, "We enjoy the freedom to create and to choose the form of theatre we are producing.



photos: Randa Shaath



Left and above: Hosh El-Basha: the extensively decorated tomb of Ibrahim Pasha son of Muhammed Ali; the headstone on one of the tombs in the same hosh: the Turkish calligraphy with raised letters is typical of the period

A time to remember

For many centuries, one of the main features of the *Eid* was the visit to the cemetery. **Fayza Hassan** examines a dying tradition

E W Lane, *visiting Cairo in the mid-nineteenth* century, describes visits to the cemetery during the feast as chiefly the duty of the women of the household. Nowadays, however, it is mostly the men, and sometimes the older women, who perform this duty — albeit seemingly less and less willingly.

Life takes precedence over death. But visits to the *qarafa* never stopped the living from celebrating. The festive mood simply moved, with the visitors, to the burial-grounds. "On one or more days of this festival, some or all of the members of most families, but chiefly the women, visit the tombs of their relatives... the visitors or their servants carry palm branches, and sometimes sweet basil (*rihan*) to lay upon the tomb which they go to visit. The palm branch is broken into several pieces and these, or the leaves only, are placed on the tomb.

"Numerous groups of women are seen on this occasion, bearing palm branches, on their way to the cemeteries in the neighbourhood of the metropolis. They are also provided, according to their circumstances, with *kahks*, *shureyks*, *fateerehs*, bread, dates, or some other kind of food to distribute to the poor who resort to the burial grounds on these days. Sometimes tents are pitched for them; the tent surrounds the tomb which is the object of the visit.

"The visitors recite the Fat'hah, or, if they can afford it, employ a person to recite first the Soorat Yaseen, or a larger portion of the Qur'an. Often the Khatma (or recital of the whole of the Qur'an) is performed at the tomb or in the house by several *fiq'hees*. The men generally return immediately after the rites have been performed and the fragments or leaves of the palm branch laid on the tomb; the women usually go to the tomb early in the morning and do not return till the afternoon."

The traditional visit to the tombs, especially by women, has been the subject of a great deal of controversy. Said to be an Ancient Egyptian custom, it is practiced by both Muslims and Christians during their respective festivals.

In *Ma'alim Al-Qurba Fi Ahkam Al-Hisba*, written by Diya Al-Din Muhammad Ibn Muhammad Al-Qurashi Al-Shafi (known as Ibn Al-Ukhuwwa) in the 14th century, as a guide for the muhtasib — the market inspector — in the performance of his duties, it is stated that "the Muhtasib must visit burial-places and prevent women from lamenting their dead, an offense which is punishable. There is a tradition that the prophet cursed any woman who uttered lamentation and any who listened to her, any that shaved off her hair in mourning or shrieked aloud or tattooed another or was tattooed...Weeping is permitted if unaccompanied by loud cries or rending of garments or beating of cheeks — all unlawful practices. Women must be prevented from visiting graves. If they follow the bier they must not mingle with the men but shall come behind. For preference the *muhtasib* shall cause the crier to announce publicly that following the bier is forbidden. [Professional] mourning women and singers and other depraved characters shall be banished from the town if they exercise their profession."

Lane however, reports that "some [women] (but these are not generally esteemed women of correct conduct), if they have a tent, pass the night in it, and remain until the end of the festival or until the afternoon of the following Friday, so also do the women of a family possessed of a private, enclosed burial-ground with a house within it — for there are many such enclosures and not a few with houses for the accommodation of the females, in the midst of the public cemeteries of Cairo.

"The great cemetery of Bab El-Nasr, on the desert tract immediately on the north of the metropolis, presents a remarkable scene on the two *'eeds*. In a part next to the city gates from which the burial-ground takes its name, many swings and whirligigs are erected, and several large tents, in some of which dancers, reciters of Aboo-Zeyd [the Sira of Bani Hilal], and other performers, amuse a dense crowd of spectators; and throughout the burial-ground are seen numerous tents for *the reception of the visitors of the tombs.*"

These festivities were a way for Cairenes to mark the end of the fast, and the population's tenacity in celebrating the feast, even in the face of disaster, gives an idea of how important they were. Novelist Alexandre Kinglake set out for the wilds of the Sahara in 1834, arriving in Cairo at the time of the plague. In *Chronicles Abroad: Cairo* he remarks: "...at this very time when the Plague was raging so furiously, and on this very ground which resounded so mournfully with the howls of arriving funerals, preparations were going on for the religious festival called Kourban Bairam. Tents were pitched, and swings hung for the amusement of children — a ghastly holiday! But the Mohametans take a pride, and a just pride, in following their ancient customs undisturbed by the shadow of death."

Travellers to Cairo often visited the great (or northern) and the southern cemeteries, where several Imams and venerated sheikhs are buried. The southern *qarafa* in particular became the object of many pilgrimages because it was established around the mausoleum of the Imam El-Shafei, the founder of one of the four rites of Sunni Islam. He was a descendant of the Prophet's uncle, Abu Talib, and came to Egypt in the ninth century. He died in 820. In 1211 AD, Sultan El-Malik El-Kamel Mohamed El-Ayyoubi Ibn El-Sultan El-Adel buried his son next to the mausoleum of the Imam, to which he added a dome which became famous for its unique architecture from the Maghreb to the Arabian peninsula and beyond. The dome is said to have been made of two wooden shells covered with lead then decorated.

El-Malik had a canal dug to bring water from Birket El-Habash to the *qarafa* and he ordered the establishment of luxuriant gardens. People then abandoned the northern *qarafa* and the burial-grounds of Bassatin for the new cemetery. During the reign of El-Nasser Mohamed Ibn Qalaoun, many princes were buried in the Imam El-Shafei cemetery and Sufi quarters were built, street markets were established, and private dwellings sprouted up along the way from Birket El-Habash to the Imam El-Shafei Mosque. The *sadaqat* (collective private endowments) were important enough to finance the maintenance of the mosque, the cemetery grounds and the *madrasa*, writes El-Maqrizi, the historian of the Mamehuke period, in his *Khitat*. Travellers, Arab and European, passing through Cairo were drawn to the area and waxed lyrical about its beauty and affluence.

Ibn Gubair, visiting Cairo, described at length the important size of the Imam El-Shafei dome raised over the mausoleum and the harmony of its proportions. He considered its decorations of gold the most beautiful he had seen on any monument. Al-Abdari, another Arab traveller, exclaimed at the importance of a *waqf* (pious endowment) which financed the free meals offered to the poor on a daily basis, the excellence of which he commented on extensively. He also marveled at the beauty of the mausoleum's dome, the like of which he had never seen, lavishly decorated with pure gold.

Ibn Saidi, another traveller, mentioned the large mosque in which the Friday prayer was performed, the *madrasa* of the Imam's followers attached to the mosque and the value of the *waqf* which provided the livelihood of so many Qur'an readers at the cemetery. El-Taguibi described at length the garden surrounding the mausoleum as well as "the very large dome, an example of creative imagination and precise execution." The beauty of the decorations in pure gold defy the imagination, he wrote. (*Athar Masr Al-Islamiya fi Kitabat Al-Rahalla Al-Maghareba wal-Andalusiyyin*: "The Islamic Monuments of Egypt in the Writings of Travellers from the Maghreb and Andalusia", by Dr Mohamed Mohamed El-Kahlawi, *Dar El-Masriya El-Libnaniya, 1994*).

Today, the southern *qarafa* has retained little of its past splendour, but Imam El-Shafei continues to attract many pilgrims and worshippers to the mosque. The extraordinary dome, however, no longer shines with gold.

"The present dome dates from 1772 and we do not know how closely it corresponds to the shape of the original. On its peak, like a weathervane, is a famous metal boat which is supposed to hold grains for birds although little grain seems to go into it these days. The decoration of the exterior has carry-overs from the Fatimid period — step crenallation, interlacing strap-work frieze on the cornice, blind arches with ribbed hoods, separating rosettes and lozenges." (*Islamic Monuments in Cairo, A Practical Guide*, Richard B Parker, Robin Sabin and Caroline Williams, The American University in Cairo Press, 1988).

The burial-grounds are in dire need of attention. Directly behind the tomb of El-Imam El-Shafei, in Hosh El-Basha, the tomb of the family of Muhammad Ali, the courtyard, "once a lushly planted garden, is now barren and dusty. Inside, lie the sons of Muhammad Ali by his first and favourite wife — Tusun, Ismail, Ibrahim — surrounded by their wives, children, and devoted servants, distinguished statesmen and counsellors. In an outer room, several to a cenotaph, lie the mamelukes and retainers of Muhammad Ali. The thirty or forty cenotaphs rise in several layers. They are exuberantly carved with flowers, garlands and fronds and are guilded and painted in bright colours."

Whether private tombs are visited periodically or not, maintained and generally kept in good order, this ultimately remains the province of the family and their sole decision, but others, which are part of our national heritage, should be preserved like other historical monuments. The descendants of great men and women who have left their mark on the country's history and are buried under monuments of irreplaceable architectural value are more often than not in no position to keep up the maintenance of these tombs. Neglect and devastation can only diminish our national treasure.

During the second half of the twentieth century, write Galila El-Qadi and Alain Bonnamy, "the conservation of the national heritage was not a priority and the living took precedence over the dead. While modern high-rises sprouted in the old city, damaging or erasing old structures, the city of the dead was pragmatically put to use. Nowadays, the vast tomb of Prince Hussein Kamal houses primary and secondary classes, while the tomb of Prince Halim at El-Imam El-Shafei has become the primary school of El-Imamein. That of the Tahtawi family, close by, accommodates a social service centre, and the large mausoleum opposite has been transformed into a polyclinic while some two-storeyed tombs have been transformed into offices. In the sixties the idea of razing an important part of the mamelukes' necropolis was seriously considered. It had become a invaluable piece of real estate.

"In 1968, however, a new law on the cemeteries was promulgated in an attempt to codify the ownership of land in the *qarafa* and put a stop to speculation on the land. But it was too little too late and while, with a new awareness of the value of our national heritage, the authorities are trying to save what is left, the *qarafa* today is more a type of informal settlement for the living, with all that this entails in damages to the existing monuments, than burial grounds in which the dead rest in peace under mausoleums showcasing the art and architecture of times gone by (from "Enjeux et Patrimoine", chapter VI of *La Cité des Morts au Caire*: "The City of the Dead in Cairo", unpublished manuscript, ORSTOM).







ERQ SOOS SPECIAL: This vendor of erq *soos* (*liquorice*) can be found in the Khan El-Khalili only at *iftar* time. He makes it his duty to go around serving the shopkeepers of the area a glass of the popular drink to break their fast. Having made the rounds, he does not linger but disappears until the following day. According to the objects of his attentions, this is the best erq soos in town and breaking the fast with a glass of it, is a special experience.



photo: Khaled El-Fiqi





Life is a game: top, Nelly kicks up her heels in the Ramadan riddles; below, Nour El-Sherif as Haroun El-Rashid

Abdel-Salam Amin: Guess again

A month of birth, and of memories

Making a salad is Abdel-Salam Amin's favourite hobby, especially in Ramadan. He compares it to the riddles: both salads and the *Fawazir*, he says, are full of vitamins and colours. He spends about an hour before *iftar* in the kitchen, chopping up vegetables for the salad. "At *iftar* I need only a glass of hot water, a date, and salad. Salads are like the riddles: simple, brightly-coloured and useful." His salads are popular among his neighbours, too.

Ramadan is a special time for Abdel-Salam Amin. He was born on Thursday, 3 December 1946, the seventh of Ramadan, at dawn, in Kafr El-Sheikh. One of his grandfathers was from the Delta, the other from Upper Egypt.

Abdel-Salam Amin lived in Mansoura, finished his studies in Cairo, started his career in Alexandria and completed it in Cairo. The son of an employee of the Ministry of *Awqaf* (religious endowments) and an educated mother — a rare phenomenon at the time — he had many sisters and brothers. One of his brothers, Helmi Amin, is a composer. He was educated at Al-Azhar School, then shifted to a public secondary school. He entered the Arabic department at the Faculty of Arts, and later wrote his thesis on Al-Asfahani's *Aghani*.

Alexandria Radio was then the only national station to employ talented young people who were not yet established in their field. Amin's brother worked as a composer there, and Amin himself began writing poems for the station when he was only 16. He wrote poems for Al-Naqshabandi, a singer of religious songs, and the poet Abdel-Wahab Mohamed, the artist who may be said to have discovered Amin, exclaimed: "I have heard a new poet and I believe he will be a star in this field." The two were inseparable friends until Mohamed's death.

Amin writes historical drama with a specific aim in mind: to rediscover history and show the public how they can live as their ancestors did. "The past is full of characters that need to be rediscovered. I do not write about a specific person for his own sake, but as a way of writing about a whole society at a certain time." He does not write about complex or religious issues. His favourite topics are justice and equality: these inspire most of his work. "I do not mean to escape from reality and live in the past, all I want to do is give examples to the society I live in of just rulers and pioneering citizens," he says.

The "average individual" is the thermometer by which he measures the reaction to his work: "I ask people about their opinion. I sit with them before I write and go to them after my work appears on the screen." Amin believes that whoever reaches the man in the street also reaches intellectuals and the ruling class.

He began writing historical drama in the '80s. The first series was *Taht Zilal El-Suyouf* ("In the Shadows of Swords"). *Al-Zahra wa'l-Seif* ("The Flower and the Sword") was about Cairo, seen through the character of Jawhar Al-Siqilli, who conquered Egypt and built the university-mosque of Al-Azhar. Describing society through the ruler's character, he believes, renders it both more immediately accessible and more interesting to viewers.

In the same spirit, he wrote about Omar Ibn Abdel-Aziz, said to be the fifth rightly-guided caliph, whom he portrayed as an ideal ruler, an example for any ruler at any time, like his four predecessors. This year Egyptian television is broadcasting *Al-Amir Al-Maghoul* ("The Unknown Amir"), the series about Haroun Al-Rashid. One of the rulers that Abdel-Salam Amin has rediscovered, Haroun Al-Rashid was known mainly for his love of women; but Amin insists he was innocent of the misdeeds attributed to him. Amin sees Haroun Al-Rashid's rule as a golden age, encompassing pilgrimage to the holy sites and conquest of new lands for the Muslims. The amir also encouraged intellectual activity, especially translation to and from Arabic, for which he gave translators the weight of their books in gold.

In 1985 Fahmi Abdel-Hamid, the director of the *Fawazir*, convinced him to write the immensely popular Ramadan riddles. He refused at first because he wanted to concentrate on drama and believed his talents lay exclusively in that direction, but then discovered that he was able to put in the required effort and obtain pleasing results. Seeking his own style, he refused to watch the riddles written by his predecessors so as not to be affected by others. This attitude convinced Abdel-Hamid that Amin would be a hit. He has been — for over ten years. He worked with Abdel-Hamid for five years, on the riddles and *Alf Leila Wa Leila* ("One Thousand and One Nights"). After Abdel-Hamid's death in 1990, Amin stopped the riddles in the middle of the month because he felt that "the new director ruined all the work."

The vocabulary Amin uses is unfamiliar to many viewers. Several have commented that he seems to have invented a special language for the riddles, but Amin himself says that whatever he writes is from the Arabic heritage: the words and phrases may not have been used for a long time, giving them the spirit of the subject and the occasion. In keeping with his love for history and Arabic, Amin considers Beiram El-Tunsi the best writer of riddles Egypt has seen. "We are all his pupils, even Salah Jahine," he says.

After Fahmi Abdel-Hamid's death, a journalist wrote about the opportunities he had given to young directors and asked if Amin would give other poets similar opportunities while he was still alive. Amin's response was straightforward: he said that he would stop writing the riddles. But he soon changed his mind. A young Algerian girl wrote him a tearful letter saying she could hardly wait for the riddles from Egypt, which were taped and sent to her. Accompanying the letter was a picture of herself, a girl in a wheelchair. Amin wrote *Al-Dunia Li'ba* ("Life Is a Game"); one episode, dedicated to the girl, was about disabled people and the challenges they face. "After the riddles were broadcast I received a letter from her, in which she enclosed a flower in response to the message I had sent her."

He stopped writing riddles for Egyptian television after that, to let the audience watch *Omar Ibn Abdel-Aziz*, because he did not like the idea of monopolising viewers' attention, and to give other writers a chance. He wishes young poets would take up where their predecessors had left off: this is where creative activity starts, he says. Fahmi Abdel-Hamid is still his hero: "A great director who laid the foundations for other directors of the riddles." Amin also sees Nelly's successors as pale reflections of the star who sang, danced and had a light touch very compatible with the spirit of the *Fawazir*. Ammar El-Sheri'i is another favourite, the composer whose music best expressed Amin's words. They admired each other's work before they met, then worked together, most recently on *Haroun Al-Rashid*.

After graduation, he joined the army, staying on from 1956 until 1974, and fighting in the War of Attrition. A poem he wrote in 1967 spoke of victory and hopes for a better society, of Amin's dreams of Sinai. The poem was put aside until 1973, when Karem Mahmoud sang it: a statement that Amin's prediction had come to pass. Although he left the army in 1974, it has continued to preoccupy him: Amin has celebrated the October War in various operettes, unified by the theme of Egyptians themselves. Heads of state occupy him little, and only insofar as they represent national aspirations and the flag — symbols of the nation. The desert is another theme he has drawn on frequently, as the place where dreams are fulfilled. *Shams Oktober* ("October Sun"), written four years ago, is about the Western Desert: "Beneath the desert is a lake... From your grandfathers' time, Egyptians... Your land and borders, Egyptians." The operetta was broadcast during the celebrations which accompanied the opening of the Toshki Canal.

After leaving the army, he worked in the Egyptian Embassy in Italy for four years, where he accumulated experiences he has since drawn on for the *Fawazir*. During this period he began to travel: Paris, Geneva and elsewhere. Each new city inspired him. In *Hawl Al-Alam* ("Around the World"), he described traditions from different countries and quizzed the audience on their origin.

Abul-Alaa Al-Ma'arri's *Risalat Al-Ghofran* ("Message of Forgiveness") was the first book he ever read. He did not understand it, so his father gave him *Alf Leila Wa Leila* to read, and this was the beginning for him. Then he read the story of the wolf and the lion in *Kalila wa Dimna*, from which he drew other lessons for life: if the lion is hungry, it eats its dearest friend.

Fear of hypocrisy and a passion for independence: he hates being either a boss or an employee. He never asks for favours in return for his work, or writes a word in favour of anyone he does not sincerely admire. When he speaks, he does not use his hands: even this, he sees as a form of acting.

Whenever he begins to write something new, he panics. Writer's block: before he sets the pen to paper, he feels he has never written a word. Every time is the first. But when he watches his work on television or listens to it on the radio, he does not believe that he is the one who wrote the words.

He is very simple. His house is on a small street in Manshiyat Al-Bakri. There is no assistant at the office. He opens the door himself, greets visitors with a quiet simplicity that makes one feel instantly at home.

Although his family is his entire life, he guards his independence jealously. He has converted an apartment across the street from his house into an office where he works and receives guests. A pulley stretches across the street between office and home, and a basket brings a plate of Ramadan pastries across. "Not a *téléférique*," he giggles, "only a *basketérique*." Puns, obviously, are a favourite form of communication.

The spirit of Ramadan is everywhere — the smell of incense, the Qur'an on his desk. On the walls are photos of Amin with his wife, Amin receiving awards, the certificates he received at festivals or press events, like the one *Al-Ahram Al-Masa'i* awarded him after the referendum on the best radio drama, for *Omar ibn Abdel-Aziz* in 1991.

On the desk, there is a snapshot of his first — and, until now, only — grandson, Omar Abdel-Aziz. He was born after the series was broadcast and, "as names reflect personality and identity," was named after Amin's hero. Amin hopes his grandson will have the caliph's personality. Mohamed, a prosecutor, Ghada, a TV announcer, a daughter who studies fine arts, and the youngest daughter, who studies script-writing, are Amin's children.

Amin has written many songs for different occasions and singers, but he is very careful about writing for the theatre. Writing for plays, he believes, requires time, money, and a high level of cooperation among the singers. He only writes songs for the theatre if he is deeply affected by the text.

He shies away from meetings, spotlights, cameras. He prefers to work silently. His only publicity is his work. He is either preparing a new project, or reading, or writing; he has no time to publish his poems. After finishing the series about Moses, broadcast this Ramadan on the radio, he will start to attend the shooting of the film about Abdel-Halim Hafez, to be directed by Dawoud Abdel-Sayed. True to form, Amin will tell the history of the nation through Abdel-Halim's life and songs.

Profile by **Nesmahar Sayed**

Pack of Cards

by Madame Sosostris

♣ Darlings, I am so busy these days you wouldn't believe it. I am paying the price of my extreme popularity and my expertise in so many fields. I hop, skip and jump from one end of Cairo to the other, from *iftar* to *sohour*, premieres to conferences, concerts to official events. One would need several of me to fulfil all these obligations but, as everyone knows, copies of masterpieces remain nothing more than copies and everyone wants the original.

Well, to start the week I took my original self to an important venue at the Gezira Sheraton, where **Atef Ebeid**, public sector affairs minister and state minister for administrative development and environmental affairs, and **Hussein Bahaaeddin**, minister of education, together with **Salah Hafez**, head of the Egyptian Environment Affairs Association (EEAA), invited me to attend the Arab Bureau for Youth and Environment celebration of Environment Day, during which the bureau awarded a shield to **President Hosni Mubarak** for his achievements in environmental matters. In his address, **Emad Adli**, director of the bureau, pointed out that the first environmental law was promulgated and the Ministry of Environmental Affairs created under President Mubarak's rule. Could I miss such an occasion? You know how environmentally-friendly I am. I donned my organically-grown polyester tunic and lead-free ear decorations and there I was, ready to defend the environment with my very own life.

♥ Hardly did I have time to hit home base, however, than I was on the go again, this time attending a brainstorming session at my own headquarters, *Al-Ahram Weekly*, with Hosny Guindy, editor-in-chief of our esteemed paper, **Ann Radwan**, executive director of the Fulbright Commission, Ambassador **Abdel-Raouf El-Reedy**, director of the Mubarak Public Library, architect **Gamal Bakri** and several colleagues from the three institutions. I bet you are dying to know what caused such distinguished brains to meet. No, it is not the next Internet revolution, for I am planning that single-handedly; it is the poor 19th-century buildings of downtown Cairo, in such dire need of restoration. We all agreed that time and neglect had practically done the poor dears in, together with a good chunk of our country's history. A plan of action was devised to help save what is left of our heritage. You will read all about it on these very pages and very soon I promise you.

♦ With coats of my favourite light blue nail polish not quite dry, I propelled myself to one of the numerous *iftars* to which I had been summoned, this one at the Heliopolis Meridien, where **Hussein Ghaleb**, its very distinguished general manager, and his charming wife were hosting an *iftar* attended by many of my colleagues from *Al-Ahram* and other publications. Pretty **Nihal Zamzam**, public relations manager of the hotel, was in attendance, looking after her guests with her customary solicitude. I hardly had time to tell her where to find the sky blue nail polish than my blue cellular phone (yes, dears, I have one to match every outfit) informed me that I was requested elsewhere.

♠ I dashed madly across town (no dears, I belong to the vacuum cleaner generations, I have never used a broom in my life) and arrived at Cinema Radio to attend the private preview of *Bekhit wa Adila* part II. Guess who I saw in the flesh? **Adel Imam** (Bekhit in the film) himself. After seeing the film, I have to admit that Adel has surpassed himself this time if this is at all possible. As we shook hands, sparks flew with the meeting of two superstars. Shereen, (who starred as Adila) was looking divine as always, chatting with **Lenin El-Ramli**, author, not only of the original political satire which inspired the scenario, but of the film script as well, and with **Nader Galal**, director of the film. A truly celestial conflagration!

photo: Mohamed Wassim

Adel Imam, superstar talking to Hassan Abu Basha former minister of interior at the private preview of *Bekhit wa Adila* part II

♥ A quick catnap and there I was, *iftar*-hopping again, this time to Oriental Hall at the AUC, where *Al-Ahram*'s **Farouk Guweida** was speaking on my favourite topic, the restoration of Cairo's old buildings. My dear **Farouk** is a real expert on the subject, and it is such a pleasure to listen to him that, when my green cellular rang to remind me of my duties, I almost decided to just let it ring.

♣ Of course I could not have missed the invitation to Le Pasha in Zamalek, hosted by renowned surgeon **Fathi Iskandar**, director of El-Salam Hospital in Mohandessin. This is one annual *iftar* I never miss, nor does anyone who is anyone in Greater Cairo. I shook so many hands that I will have to pay a visit to my friend **Fathi** at the hospital so that he arranges for my arm to be put in a sling for a few days. I will have to choose a colour to match all the outfits I plan to wear this coming week.